

Sky Island Tours

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# The Sky Island News

Vol. 17 No. 1

January 2026

*“The North American sparrows, as a group, present an inordinate amount of difficulty and consternation for the average birder.”*

Kenn Kaufman

Happy 2026! I hope that you had a great holiday season! It was nice to take a little break to spend quality time with family and friends. I hope that you were able to do the same. Now that the holidays are over, it is time to jump right back into it. Wings over Willcox is in a couple of weeks and I hope to see you there. It is a festival filled with excellent birding, great people, and we don't have to worry about being hot. It will be a great way to kick off the new year.

I wish you a very happy, healthy, and Nature-filled 2026. I hope you like this month's issue!

## January Field Trip

**Birding Whitewater Draw. Thursday, January 8. 7:30AM-1:00PM.** Cost is \$10/person. Email ([jeff@skyislandtours.com](mailto:jeff@skyislandtours.com)) to register. **LIMIT 15 PARTICIPANTS.**



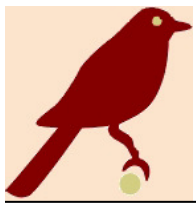
January is a good time to visit Whitewater Draw to check out the Sandhill Cranes and many other birds that spend the winter at this hotspot. It may be cold so dress in layers. We will meet at the dirt lot at the top of the Sonoita/Patagonia/SR 83 exit ramp (exit #281) and carpool to Whitewater.

## January Classes

**Feathered Family Portrait: Sparrows, Towhees, and Allies. Friday, January 9. 10AM-12PM.** Las Campanas (565 W. Belltower Dr., in Green Valley). To register, call 648-7669 or visit

<https://www.gvrec.org>.

Sparrows and their allies are a diverse collection of birds that can be found almost anywhere in North America. This class delves into the natural history of these birds, such as habitats used, migration patterns, diet, and breeding. Students will also learn some tips to identify these birds in the field.



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**Woodpeckers of the World. Tuesday, January 20. 10AM-12PM. Virtual Class Via Zoom.** Tucson Botanical Gardens. To register, use this link <https://tucsonbotanical.org/class-schedule/>.

Woodpeckers are spectacular birds - colorful, industrious, and conspicuous. The Feathered Family Portrait series continues with a global look at the Picidae, which also includes flickers, sapsuckers, and wrynecks.

**Feathered Family Portrait: Owls. Friday, January 23. 10AM-12PM.** Las Campanas (565 W. Belltower Dr., in Green Valley). To register, call 648-7669 or visit <https://www.gvrec.org>.

The Family Portrait series continues with a global exploration of owls, iconic nocturnal birds that really need no introduction. Found from the Arctic to tropical rainforest, owls inhabit most habitats on Earth. This class explores the natural history of owls, including their diversity, biology, and conservation. Students will learn to identify owls visually and vocally, as well as where and how to look for them.

## Pima County Presentations

These online programs are free but you must register in order to receive the Zoom link to the presentation. The programs are recorded and all who have registered will receive the link to the recording. If you have questions or need assistance, contact us at: [eeducation@pima.gov](mailto:eeducation@pima.gov).

Visit our **Eventbrite page** at <https://bit.ly/Nature-Online-Tickets> to register. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation. **Note that we have switched ticketing platforms and this is a new link.**

**Order Up! Longhorn Beetles. Tuesday, January 6. 7-8PM. Virtual Presentation Via Zoom.** Free, but registration required. To register visit <https://bit.ly/Nature-Online-Tickets>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

Named for their long antennae, longhorn beetles are some of the most beautiful and strikingly patterned of all beetles. They also play important roles as pollinators and nutrient cyclers in forest ecosystems.



Green-and-Black Poison Frog  
Paul Besson

**Lifestyles of the Smooth and Scaly: Poison Frogs. Thursday Jan. 8. 7-8PM. Virtual Presentation via Zoom.** Free, but registration is required. To register visit <https://bit.ly/Nature-Online-Tickets>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

Some of the most beautiful frogs in the world hide a deadly secret – they are highly toxic. This month we head to the tropics to explore the amazing, colorful world of poison frogs.

**Adventures in Birding: Manakins. Tuesday, January 13. 7-8PM. Virtual Presentation via Zoom.** Free, but registration is required. To register visit <https://bit.ly/Nature-Online-Tickets>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.



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Orange-collared Manakin  
Austin Groff

This month, shake off winter’s chill with an exploration of this delightful group of Neotropical birds. Known for their colorful plumage and dynamic courtship displays, manakins are a favorite of birders who travel to the New World tropics.

**The World of Mammals: Pocket Gophers. Tuesday, January 20. 7-8PM. Virtual Presentation via Zoom.** Free, but registration is required. To register visit <https://bit.ly/ticketsEE>. Once registered you will receive a link to the Zoom presentation.

Wonderfully adapted to a subterranean existence, pocket gophers are rarely seen above ground. Evidence of their presence often comes from the mounds of soil deposited during burrow excavation. Despite looking similar, pocket gophers exhibit surprising cryptic diversity that has only recently been discovered.

## Exciting Announcement!!!

I'm excited to share my family's new endeavor - saving dogs and reducing stray and shelter overcrowding! 🐾

Every day, countless dogs struggle on the streets or wait in overcrowded shelters, through no fault of their own. **RK Bear Rescue** is here to change that!

Our mission is to reduce stray and shelter overcrowding through education, community involvement, and eventually our own rescue facility. With your support, we can provide vet care, food, supplies, training, and programs that keep more rescue dogs safe and in loving homes.

**Join us on this journey!** Like, share, or donate to help us save more furry lives.

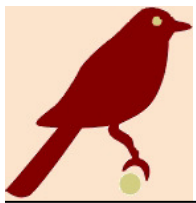
Learn more: [rkbearrescue.org](http://rkbearrescue.org)

Follow us on TikTok & Instagram: [@rkbearrescue](https://www.instagram.com/rkbearrescue)

#RKBearRescue #AdoptDontShop #RescueDogs #DogRescue #SupportLocalRescue #SavingLives

## What’s in a Name: Towhees

Towhees are a fun group of birds to me – they are common but elusive enough that sighting one is always a delight. They are large, long-tailed members of the New World sparrow family (Passerellidae), that also includes juncos, and smashing tropical species like brushfinches and chlorospinguses, in addition to the



namesake sparrows. It is a fascinating and varied family of birds that offer many beautiful species that are well worth the patience often required to get a good look. Let's jump in!

The word towhee first appeared in print in 1729 in Mark Catesby's *The Natural History of Carolina, Florida, and the Bahama Islands*. The name is imitative of the call that one species utters. There are 2 genera of towhees with representatives of both in the US and Canada.

At one time all towhees were placed in the genus *Pipilo* until genetic data suggested that that arrangement did not accurately reflect the relationships among the birds. In 2010 the American Ornithologist's Union (AOU) split the 'brown' towhees and relatives out of *Pipilo* and into *Melospiza*. The name *Pipilo* comes from Latin, meaning 'to chirp or 'peep.' It was coined in 1816 by French ornithologist Louis Pierre Vieillot. There are 4 extant species in the genus, 3 in North America and 1 restricted to central Mexico.

The first to be described, not surprisingly, was Eastern Towhee (*P. erythrophthalmus*), by Carolus Linnaeus in 1758. The name means 'red eye' in Greek, reflecting a noticeable feature of these birds. This scientific name at one time pertained to a bird called Rufous-sided Towhee that ranged through much of the US and Canada, south into Mexico. However, eastern and western populations were split in 1995 by the AOU based on differences in plumage and vocalizations.

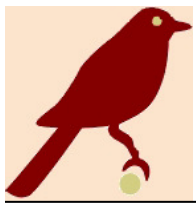
With the split, western populations became Spotted Towhee (*P. maculatus*). Both the common and scientific names refer to the white spots on the upperparts (although the extent of the spotting is geographically variable). Spotted Towhee was described in 1827 by English artist and naturalist William Swainson (who has a hawk, thrush, and warbler named after him) from specimens collected in the Real del Monte, Hidalgo state, Mexico.



The third *Pipilo* in North America is Green-tailed Towhee (*P. chlorurus*), a very snazzy bird with a rufous cap, white throat, and yellowish-green wings and tail. It is a bird that I never get tired of looking at! It was named by John James Audubon in 1839 from birds collected in Bingham County, Idaho. While distinctive from a North American perspective, Green-tailed Towhee's coloration is similar to other passerellids found in the New World tropics.

The second towhee genus is *Melospiza*, comprising 9 species that range from the southwestern

US to Costa Rica. While the 3 species found in the US (plus 1 additional species in Mexico) are called



towhees, the other species are known as ground-sparrows, highlighting the fact that towhees are essentially just large sparrows. *Melospiza* is Greek, meaning 'belted (or banded) cheek,' referring to the crescent-shaped black and chestnut ear patch in White-faced (or Prevost's) Ground-Sparrow (*M. biarcuata*) of southern Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador.

Canyon Towhee (*M. fusca*) is a relatively plain grayish brown bird with a rusty crown, tawny undertail coverts, and buffy highlights. The specific epithet is Latin for 'dusky.' Canyon Towhee was named by Swainson in 1827 from birds collected in Mexico.

If you have been birding for a long enough period, you may remember the days when there were birds called Brown Towhee. Ranging from Oklahoma and Texas to the Pacific Coast of California and Oregon south to Mexico. That was the state of affairs until the late 1980s when ornithologists started to recognize differences in populations along the Pacific coast and those inland. In 1989, the two forms of Brown Towhee were split into Canyon Towhee and California Towhee.



California Towhee (*M. crissalis*) is larger and darker than Canyon. It also lacks the dark breast spot of Canyon and the rufous cap is not as pronounced. Nicholas Vigors, an Irish ornithologist and politician, named the species in 1839 with the type locality of Monterey, California. The specific epithet is Latin and is a reference to the cinnamon colored crissum or undertail coverts.

The final *Melospiza* found in the US is Abert's Towhee (*P. aberti*), an eponym for Lt. Col. James William Abert, a member of the US Army Topographical Engineers, who, was a naturalist and artist in addition to being an engineer,

explored desert Southwest. Spencer Fullerton Baird named the species in 1852 using specimens Abert sent back to the Smithsonian that were collected at Gila Bend, Arizona. Genetic studies have shown that California Towhee is more closely related to Abert's than it is to Canyon, which were formerly considered conspecific! An interesting sidenote is that Abert's (or Tassel-eared) Squirrel (*Sciurus aberti*) is named after James' father, John James Abert, who was head of the Topographical Engineers for many years.

I call towhees 'sparrows on steroids.' As I write this, 2 Canyon and one Green-tailed Towhees are gobbling up seeds at my feeders. It is interesting to watch their behavior, as it differs between the 2. Canyons tend to stay still, hunkering down to the ground, much like some Mourning Doves. My guess is that the plain coloration of these birds offers them some camouflage. Green-tailed Towhee, on the other hand, dive into cover quickly. Perhaps because they are more noticeable? I don't know. I just enjoy watching them!



## Furry Mound-building Sausages

Many mammals are small and nocturnal, easily escaping notice by the casual observer. This does not mean that evidence of their presence cannot be found. Prickly pear pads that have been nibbled on are one example. The collection of sticks and other debris are a sure sign that woodrats (aka packrats) are present. Burrows in the ground are another. If one takes time to notice them, their abundance becomes clear. Burrows are everywhere! Most burrowers do their excavations in natural settings. Others, however, sometimes do their digging in human-modified habitats like lawns, parks, and golf courses. When this happens, people get upset with the diggers. A good example of mammals that sometimes raise the ire of people are pocket gophers.

Pocket gophers are rodents in the family Geomyidae, which translates as ‘earth mouse.’ According to the Mammal Diversity Database, there are 42 species of pocket gopher, placed in 7 genera. They are found only in the Americas, from Canada to (barely) northern South America. In other regions, the niche of small burrowing rodents is filled by creatures that have converged on a very similar appearance but are not closely related to pocket gophers. This is known as convergent evolution.



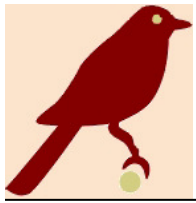
Botta's Pocket Gopher  
Christopher Mayhew

Pocket gophers' closest relatives are the pocket mice and kangaroo rats, which are in the Heteromyidae. One of the features shared between the 2 groups is the external, fur-lined cheek pouches ('pockets') that are used to transport food. Otherwise, the 2 families are not all that similar in appearance.

Within their range, pocket gophers can be found in all habitats from sea level to timberline, as long as the soil is soft enough to easily burrow in. They are not found in areas prone to flooding or where the soil is rocky.

Pocket gophers possess small eyes and ears, common characteristics of mammals with a mostly subterranean existence. North American species attain total

lengths of 10 – 12 inches, the tail being much shorter than the body. They are very good at matching pelage color with local soil color and a single species can express a wide range of color. Individuals that live in beach sand can be almost white whereas others of the same species living in volcanic soil can be almost



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black. Alternatively 2 species living in soils of the same color can look identical externally. Recent genetic studies have shown that there are more pocket gopher species than previously thought. For example, what was thought to be 1 species in Texas is actually 6 species! When it comes to identifying a pocket gopher, assuming one is lucky enough to see one, looking at the range maps in the field guide is an excellent first step.

Despite considerable variation in pelage color, pocket gophers share many physical characteristics. They have stocky cylindrical bodies (think a furry sausage) with a large head and no distinct neck. The forelegs are powerful and end in large feet that have long broad claws. The fur is short and velvety, allowing it to move in any direction, a trait share with another group of fossorial (digging) mammals, the moles.

Vegetarian in diet, pocket gophers feed on items such as roots, tubers, leaves, and, occasionally, bark. They will cut stems down at ground level and pull them back to their burrow. They will also pull stems down from their burrow. It is a comical experience to watch a small plant wriggle and tremble and then be pulled down out of sight by an unseen pocket gopher!

Each burrow system has an extensive network of tunnels and chambers. The tunnels radiate toward productive feeding areas. The chambers are of several types, including a central nest, food storage chambers, and waste chambers. A mound of soil on the surface in a crescent shape is a good indicator of pocket gopher presence. They are rarely seen aboveground but can be observed pushing newly excavated soil out of the burrow. They are solitary, their tunnel systems rarely overlap those of other pocket gophers.

But the digging habits of pocket gophers can get them into trouble if their earthworks occur in lawns and similar places. They can do damage to agricultural crops and orchards, 2 habitats where pocket gophers can be common. Their workings in rangelands are potential hazards for livestock.

On the positive side, the digging activities aerate and mix the soil which benefits plants. Their droppings are a fertilizer for plants and their mounds can promote growth in some plants. In some areas, pocket gophers have been found to be a significant item in the diet of owls.

Pocket gophers are well adapted to their burrowing existence. They are an often overlooked part of the local fauna in most of North America. Yes, their activities can be problematic, but they offer benefits to human interests as well. But seeing one pushing soil out of its burrow, where they often pause for a moment allowing a good, albeit brief, view, is a small pleasure for the observant naturalist.

## **Butterfly Profile: Red Admiral**

One of the last butterflies I observed in 2025 was a Red Admiral (*Vanessa atalanta*), a beautiful and distinctive insect. It is one of the roughly 2 dozen butterflies in southern Arizona with records from all months. Any day seeing one is a good day!

The upper side of all 4 wings are dark brown. However, it is easy to overlook this fact due to the flame orange bands that cross the forewings and form the hindwing margins. The forewing tips are black with bold white spots. The underside of the wings are mottled brown with blue, white, and red highlights on



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the forewings. There is really no other butterfly with which Red Admiral could be confused. At the very least it would take some effort to do so.



Found throughout the US and Canada, except in the far north, Red Admiral can be found in a wide range of habitats, from streamsides to forest openings to city parks and rights-of-way. Often, however, they are not found in large numbers. A typical day of butterflying may turn up a handful of individuals. Meanwhile, the same amount of time could produce hundreds (in good years) of American Snouts. They are like Great Purple Hairstreak (*Atlides halesus*) in this regard. Red Admiral populations do

vary to some extent and in some years they are more plentiful than others.

Caterpillars are about 1 inch long, black, with bold white spots on the sides and red highlights. Black spines cover most of the body. The foodplants include Stinging Nettle, false nettle, and other members of the nettle family (Urticaceae). In southern Arizona pellitories (*Parietaria*) are the primary host in desert valleys.

In addition to being widespread in North America, Red Admiral is also found throughout Europe, North Africa, Turkey, and Iran, including the Azores, and Canary Islands. Biogeographers term species that are found in temperate parts of Eurasia and North America Holarctic in distribution.

The name Admiral, as it pertains to butterflies, usually means that the brightest colors are found near the corners of the wings. This could be the case, for example, for butterflies in the genus *Limenitis*, such as White (*L. arthemis*), Weidemeyer's (*L. weidemeyerii*) and Lorquin's (*L. lorquini*) Admirals. However that is not likely the case with Red Admiral, as it is known by the same name in many European countries. It is like, therefore, a folk name. Another name used for the species is Red Admirable. I agree with the sentiment, as it is indeed an admirable looking butterfly. But Admirable doesn't come out of the mouth very easily. Like the other admirals, Red Admiral is a member of the brush-footed butterfly family (Nymphalidae).

Regardless, Red Admiral is a beautiful butterfly. May you see it in 2026!

## Moth in the Spotlight

Moths are a mysterious group of insects due to their largely nocturnal habits. New species are discovered all the time, even in well studied places like Europe and the US. In the same vein, population trends of most moth species are unknown so entomologists and conservationists have a difficult time knowing which moth species require conservation attention. It should not be a surprise then when a story comes along like the following.



This month we cross the Atlantic to look at a moth that has been ‘rediscovered’ after not having been seen in more than 140 years. First described in 1875 by Cajetan Felder and Alois Roghofer, *Drepanogynis insciata* was known from only 2 specimens collected in South Africa that are housed in the Natural History Museum in London. It then seemed to fall off the face of the Earth, going undetected until 2020. Between that year and 2023 a further 13 individuals were observed at 4 locations in Western Cape Province. In another in a growing list of situations, the discovery came from observations in which photographs were posted on iNaturalist.

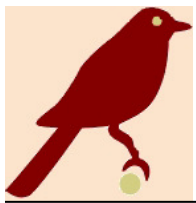


*Drepanogynis insciata* is an inchworm moth (Geometridae), making it part of the 2<sup>nd</sup> largest moth family, with over 24,000 species and counting. The subfamily it belongs to (Ennominae) alone has over 11,000 species. This is approximately the same number of birds in the world, which are classified into about 250 families! The forewings are olive green with a darker green median area and wine red highlights. Two white lines cross the forewings – the antemedial, which is somewhat S-shaped, and the postmedial, which has 2 prominent teeth pointing inward. The base of the hindwings are cream with gray in the outer portion and wine red fringe. The wingspan is about 1 inch.

It should come as no surprise to anyone that the biology of this moth is completely unknown. It is known from a total of 5 localities within about 90 miles of each other

in South Africa. They are found in a unique habitat, called the fynbos, which is a natural shrubland growing on nutrient-poor soil that is found only in South Africa. The caterpillar food plant is not known. All of the recent records are of adults attracted to lights, spanning the period from September to January.

It is great news to know that this moth, thought by some to be extinct, is still around and investigations into its natural history will shed light on its biology. This rediscovery also highlights the importance of citizen science apps like iNaturalist in documenting flora and fauna. New species have been detected based on observations posted on iNat. I suspect that the observers who posted their photos of this beautiful moth had no idea of the importance of those observations. Good on them! Hopefully, the upcoming months and years will lead to more study of this mysterious moth and its natural history will become known.



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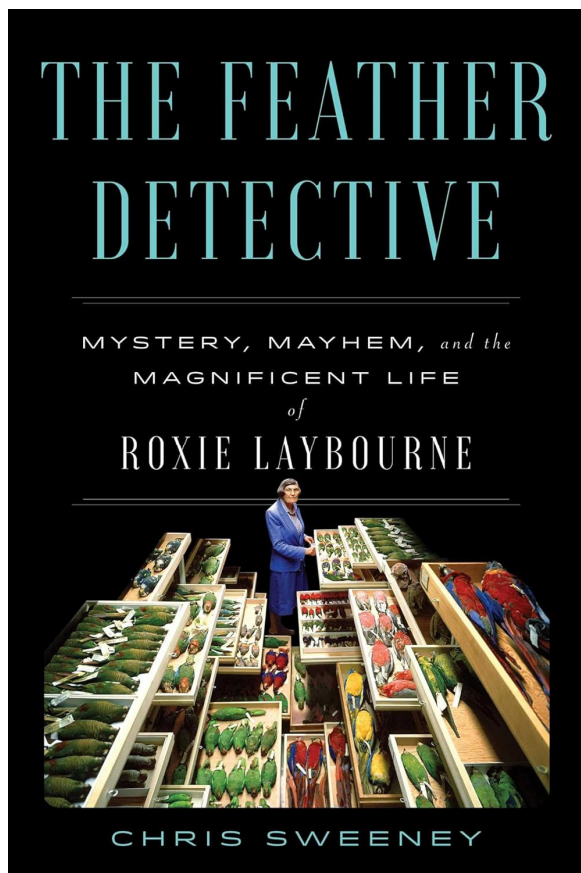
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## Book Review *The Feather Detective*. Chris Sweeney. 301 pages. Avid Reader Press. 2025.

We are all familiar with feathers. We use them to identify and admire birds. Birds themselves use feathers for flight, camouflage, courtship, nesting material, sound production, and other uses. We usually don't think of them in terms of forensics, however.

Chris Sweeney's wonderful new book opens the door to the use of feathers in forensics. It is a remarkable story. The book is essentially a biography of the world's first forensic ornithologist, Roxie Laybourne. Sweeney follows Laybourne's story from childhood in North Carolina, to pursuing a degree at Meredith College, to becoming a world renowned expert on the microstructure of feathers at the Smithsonian Institution.

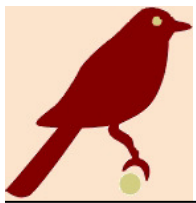
Most of the book tells the story of her work at the Smithsonian, spending countless hours glued to a microscope looking at the minute, subtle details of the feathers of birds. Roxie was fortunate to have the voluminous bird collection of the Smithsonian as a source of material for her research. Her expertise led to testifying at murder trials and becoming the world's go-to authority for identifying birds that have collided with airplanes. The US Air Force, commercial airlines, airport authorities, and the Federal Aviation Administration were Roxie's main 'customers,' sending her remains to identify following birds strikes on planes.



Along the way, we learn a great deal about Roxie, a remarkable woman who had an uneasy family life, and had to overcome the Good Ol' Boys network that existed at the time. She had an indomitable spirit and a zest for life. She toiled around DC in a sports car well into her 80s! Sweeney mentions multiple occasions where passengers were terrified to ride with Roxie. She passed away in 2003, 1 month shy of her 93<sup>rd</sup> birthday.

*The Feather Detective* is about a truly remarkable woman who I would have loved to have met. Her legacy lives on, however, her work now under the guidance of her protégé Carla Dove. In a sense, Roxie still is with us, her vast knowledge passed on to Dove and others who continue to assist law enforcement and airlines, military aviators, and others identify bird feathers.

I highly recommend this book. It is a journey into the world of an exceptional ornithologist, a world that most of us don't think about much. Until a tragedy happens and authorities need some feathers, often mangled and barely recognizable, to be identified. Then people will think of Roxie and her pioneering work.



## New Species Report

For a field biologist discovering a new species must be a sensational thing. Sure, the writing up of said new species is tedious, but the discovery must be an adrenaline rush. For those who study birds and mammals, these discoveries are not common. For invertebrates, the rate of new species discovery is much higher. In discovering a new species, I am not referring to finding cryptic taxa that are determined by genetic analysis. I am talking about finding something in the field that has not been detected before. Sometimes this may require a look under a microscope, but even then a biologist recognizes it as a new entity.

It is a fortunate biologist who discovers a single new species. Some are lucky enough to discover multiple species. A very lucky few are blessed with luck beyond measure. But perhaps no one can eclipse Mark Harvey.

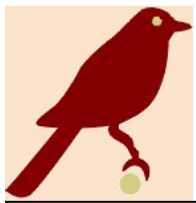


Harvey is the recently retired curator of arachnids and myriapods at the Western Australian Museum in Perth. Over his career he has discovered an astounding 1,015 species! Many of his discoveries have been arachnids – spiders, scorpions, and pseudoscorpions. But Harvey has also discovered other invertebrates including millipedes and velvet worms (not worms but more closely related to arthropods).

Harvey's very first new species was a pseudoscorpion, *Geogarypus rhantus*. His most recent discoveries were also pseudoscorpions, *Enigmachernes dissidens* and *E. parnabyi*. Both were discovered from the fur of 2 different bat species.

He discovered a short-tailed whip scorpion that he named *Draculoides bramstokeri*. One of the benefits of discovering a new species is that you get to name it. Names can reflect the species geographic range, habitat, or some attribute of the creature. They can be named after mentors, loved ones, or someone who influenced them over their career. Or you can name it, as Harvey did in this case, after fictional characters. The only thing that is off limits is naming the new species after yourself. That is considered to be poor taste.

Mark Harvey has had to come up with a lot of new names! Of course, some were discovered in collaboration with other researchers who may have coined some of the names, but that is still a lot of names!



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I congratulate Dr. Harvey on his remarkable career. I wish him well in his retirement. May he continue to find new species among the small creatures that most people never even think about.

## Did you know?

... that Northern Gannets (*Morus bassanus*) hits the water at speeds of up to 53 miles per hour? They look like arrows when they plunge into the sea, hardly making a splash. They are the envy of Olympic divers! But how do the birds not break their necks in these dives? Neck muscles lock the vertebrae in place to such an extent that gannets could theoretically survive dives of up to 179 mph! Gannets also lack external nostrils so water is not forced into the head. Air sacs, part of a bird's respiratory system, on the breast also help cushion the blow. Put it all together and you have a feathered missile that has been the end of many fish!

Another example of the wondrous adaptations that evolution has crafted that enables animals and plants to do amazing things!



Daniel Lopez-Velasco