Ramblings from the Ranger (*Overworkedtus funnyhattus*)

"To Latin, or not to Latin, that is the question!"

by Ranger Jim Serpa, Photos by Tom Haight

Our hard working camphost Stan Hart came up to me the other day and asked "Jim, what did you say the name of the new fish in the tide pool was?" I told him " It's called a convict fish."

"Are you sure?" Stan replied. "I looked it up, and I think it's a painted greenling," he went on. I said "You're right, but so am I." To clarify the confusion, I explained "*Oxylebius pictus* or, as many call it, the **painted greenling**, is also known as **the convict fish**."

So goes the dilemma...to use or not to use Latin names. It has been my experience that when you are talking about animals, or plants for that matter, if you start spouting Latin names, the average person's eyes glaze over. That teachable moment we so often talk about flies right out the window. Personally, I kind of like the Latin names. But that might be because they were forced on me during my years in the biology and zoology departments in college. One thing is for sure, there is only one *Oxylebius pictus*.

If you will bear with me and let me explain about those tongue-turning names, maybe I can convince you, as well, to give them a chance. This isn't something that just came down the pike in recent times. Many years ago people were having difficulty with names for the same animal or plant in different localities, especially in different countries. Then along came Swedish scientist Carl Von Linne in 1753 whose idea it was to use what he called the binomial nomenclature system. In a nutshell, each organism is given a series of names ending with a genus name and a species name. Both names make up the one true name for the animal. Every single animal or plant is different. Most scientists spoke Latin then so they used descriptive Latin names to help scientists identify each. Can you imagine naming every known plant and animal? It took awhile and Linne compiled two books on the subject. All of this without the use of a personal computer. Amazing!

Oxylebius pictus literally means "sharp greenling" and refers to the snout,

which is elongated. This helps distinguish it from its cousin the kelp greenling, which has a blunt snout. Other descriptive Latin names would include *Scorpaena guttata*, which is our local **scorpionfish**. Most fisherman call this a sculpin. It is, in fact, not a sculpin at all. If you look closely at the Latin name it will tell you so. *Scorpaena* means scorpion and refers to those nasty spines on the fish that can inject venom into the not so careful. The species name *guttata* means speckled, which describes its coloration. Or how about my favorite, *Gymnothorax mordax*, the **California Moray Eel**. *Gymnothorax* means bare chest, referring to the moray's lack of scales and mordax means prone to bite. In this regard not all the Latin names are accurate, because we know now the moray is not an aggressive fish at all.

Some names refer to the person who discovered the animal or plant. An example would be *Embiotica jacksoni*, which is our little **black perch**. While the Genus name *Embiotica* means offspring living within, the species name *jacksoni* merely refers to the scientist, a Mr. Jackson, who discovered that the perch gave live birth.

Here's a short list of some of the animals in our Visitor Center and their Latin names: **Treefish**, *Sebastes serriceps.* *Sebastes* means magnificent in Greek while *serriceps* means "saw head" referring to its large head spines. **Garibaldi** is a *Hypsypops rubicunda* *Hypsypops* comes from three Greek words meaning, high below the eye, referring to the wide distance from the front of the head to the eye; and *rubucunda* is red in Latin. **California Halibut**, *Paralichthys californicus Paralichthys* is Greek for parallel

fish, probably referring to the fact that the fish lies parallel to the bottom and *californicus*, obviously refers to our Golden State. Leopard Shark, *Triakis semifasciata* – *Triakis* is Greek for three pointed, referring to this shark's three pointed teeth, while *semifasciata* means half-banded, describing the distinctive markings found on the shark. Mako Shark – *Isurus oxyrinchus* – *Isurus* is Greek for equal tail referring to its homocircular caudal fin and *oxyrinchus* is Greek for sharp snout, which this shark certainly does have. Swell Shark – *Cephalloscylium ventriosum* – *Cephallosylium* means head shark in Greek. This is certainly a reference to the shark's broad head. The second name, *ventriosum*, means large belly in Latin, referring to this cute little guy's ability to inflate himself.

So you don't think it's just fish that have these cool descriptive names, there's also the Raccoon, *Procyon lotor*, *lotor* means the one who washes, referring to the fact that many raccoons like to dip their paws in water before eating. Finally *Megaptera novaengliae*, the Humpback Whale. *Megaptera* means large winged, which refers to the whale's huge flippers and *novaengliae* means New Englander, referring to where it was found in large numbers. So, if you happen to hear me calling an animal by its Latin name, please don't think I'm trying to be a smarty-pants; it's just that I don't want to confuse any of you.