

Biodiversity in Illinois: Woodland Habitats

Scientific Names

Common names for organisms are often confusing because anyone can make them up, they can be misleading and they may apply to more than one species. For example, Fulton cat, Mississippi cat, chucklehead cat, coal boater, forktail cat and great blue cat are all common names for the same fish, the blue catfish. Mosses are plants, yet many people refer to algae in a pond as 'moss.' A "jellyfish" is not a fish at all. Some species do not even have a special common name. "Crayfish" is the term applied to several different types of invertebrates that lack a specific common name.

A scientific name is the official name for each organism. A scientific name is assigned after careful research. It is made up of two parts, a genus name (written first) and a species name. *Ictalurus furcatus* is the official name for the fish referred to above as blue catfish and many other common names. Your scientific name is *Homo sapiens*. Sometimes a third part, the subspecies name, is also used. The name is always in Latin because when this naming process started, most people everywhere knew Latin. The scientific name must be underlined or in italics when written. Often a scientific name tells you something about the species or someone who studied it. Scientific names help scientists to study organisms, especially when working with other scientists.