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World notes biology icon as he turns 400 years old

BY ALDEMARO ROMERO
AND STARIA VANDERPOOL
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Carolus Linnaeus has been one of the most influential biologists in history. After all he established the system of scientific names used for all living things. We still use the scientific names he characterized as "binomial nomenclature," naming animal and plant species with two words, kind of first and last name.

The system of classification he developed was the foundation of an explosion of interest in natural history in the 18th and 19th century.

Above all, Linnaeus was one of the first "pop stars" in science, surrounded by acolytes and students at his home in Uppsala, sought out and supported by wealthy European patrons and political leaders.

Linnaeus was born May 23, 1707, at Stenbrohult, in southern Sweden. His actual last name was Linné, but because of his fame attained through the publication of his works in Latin, he is better known today by the Latinized version of his name.

Son of a gardener and a Lutheran pastor, Linnaeus was fascinated by plants from childhood. Like most naturalists of his time, he studied medicine as there was no general science of botany. Because doctors at that time relied on herbal medicines, the study of botany was part of medical school.

Linnaeus is noted for the first modern field expedition to northern Sweden, where he collected plants, insects and anthropological material from the reindeer-based culture of the Lapps. From Sweden he traveled to the Netherlands to complete his medical education.

His charismatic personality and lively interest in novel plants brought to the Netherlands by the traders and world travelers of the East Indies Companies placed him at the forefront of the "Age of Exploration." There, in 1735, that he published the first edition of his system to classify all living organisms, Systema Naturae.

He returned to Sweden in 1738, practicing medicine and specializing in the treatment of syphilis, until he was appointed as a professor at the University of Uppsala.

It was there that he started to encourage many of his students to go on expeditions around the world with a double purpose: collect new species of plants while letting people know about the new system of classification that he had invented.

Linnaeus continued improving his method of classification in successive editions of his Systema Naturae. In 1758 he published the 10th edition of that work, which is accepted by zoologists worldwide as the earliest reference to which we date back the names of animals. The foun-

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ICON: Biologist Linnaeus honored on 400th birthday

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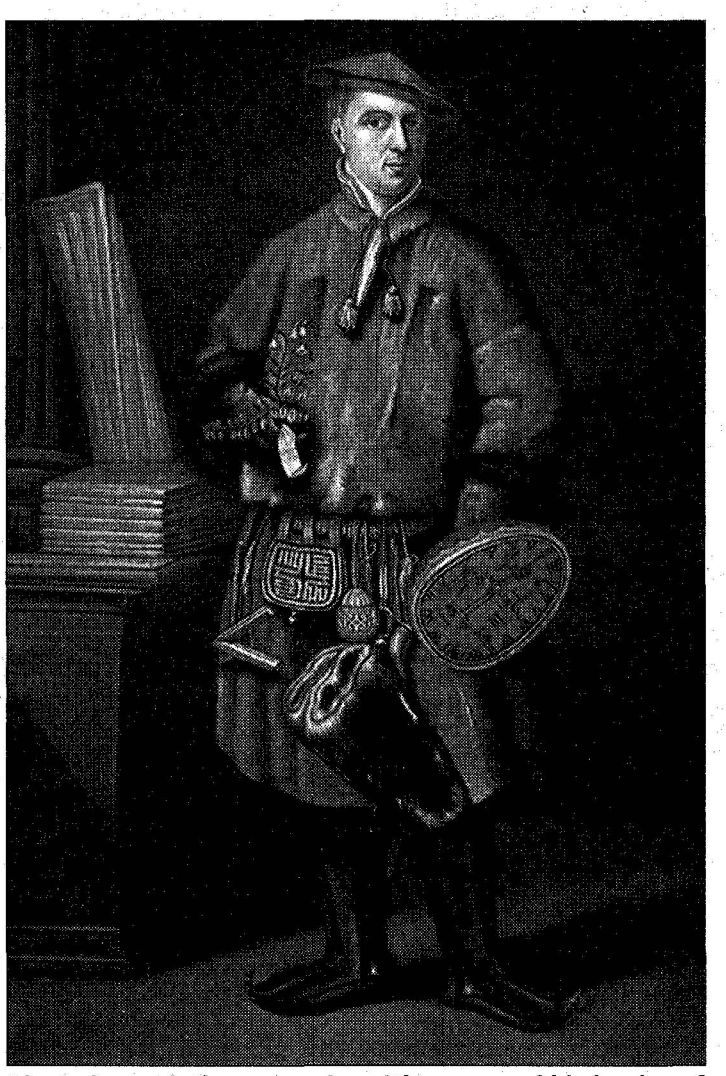
dation for plant names goes farther back, to the 1753 publication of Species Plantarum, where he named and classified all plants known to Europeans at that time.

Although he never traveled outside Sweden again, his admirers and students came to him, or shipped plants and animals from around the world to be classified and named. Many North American plants, such as the white oak and yellow ladies slipper orchid, are still known by the names assigned by Linnaeus.

He believed his mission was to classify and name all living organisms. He said of himself "God creates, Linnaeus classifies." In fact, he did not address his students as such but as his "apostles."

Despite his scientific vision Linnaeus was a vain man. He sought every conceivable award and decoration of his time and named beautiful species of plants after his friends and ugly and poisonous ones after his enemies.

Biologists of today still regard field trips as one of the highlights of their classes and research experiences. But modern field trips will never attain the grandeur of the Linnean field trips celebrating his May birthdate. Marching in columns to the music of French horns and kettledrums, they trooped through the countryside, collecting plants and insects, returning at the end of the day to disperse, cheering both science and Linnaeus.



Above is a painting, reproduced from one of his books, of young Carolus Linnaeus during his early expeditions to northern Sweden.

This Wednesday faculty and students at ASU will echo those cheers as we honor the 400-year legacy of Carolus Linnaeus, the Swedish botanist and physician who laid the foundations for modern taxonomy.

For more information contact the Arkansas State University Department of Biological Sciences at biology@astate.edu.

Dr. Romero is chairman and professor of the ASU Department of Biological Sciences, and Dr. Vanderpool is assistant professor of botany in the Department of Biological Sciences at ASU.