

Saline a natural stream, not just a drainage ditch

By **MAY BERENBAUM**

What's in a name?

The black swallowtail is one of the most striking butterflies found in central Illinois; its black forewings, often more than 3 inches across, are distinctively marked with yellow spots along the margins, and its hindwings sport a patch of iridescent blue scales and two long projections that resemble the forked tail of swallows. The caterpillar feeds innocuously, for the most part, on the foliage of such roadside weeds as Queen Anne's lace and wild parsnip. In some circles, though, this species is known as the parsleyworm, due to its occasional use of parsley (and dill, fennel, celery, and anise, for that matter) in vegetable gardens. Both names are descriptive enough, but they are more reflective of the different values and attitudes of the namers rather than the nature of the insect itself.

The black swallowtail is one of the reasons that in January 1981 I bought a house on three acres of land on the banks of the Saline Ditch just outside of Urbana. As an entomologist, I was ecstatic to find populations of this species so close to town. At least three other swallowtail species occur in the land along the Saline, where pawpaws, prickly ash and wild cherry trees grow abundantly and support populations of zebra swallowtails, giant swallowtails and tiger swallowtails, respectively.

Within a two-mile stretch down the Saline, the University of Illinois owns several tracts of land that contain three reconstructed tallgrass prairie parcels and two high-quality old growth remnants of the Big Grove, the prairie grove forest that grew up around the large bend in the river.

Before European settlement of the area, periodic fires would rage through the prairie but were stopped at the edge of water courses, thus allowing trees to establish and ultimately forests to persist. For almost nine decades, university scientists have con-

ducted world-class ecological research at these sites, producing over 400 publications in scientific journals and in general adding to the collective body of knowledge of natural areas in the Midwest.

There's a move afoot to rename the Saline Ditch as the West Salt Fork. At least a half-dozen names, including "West Branch" and "Salt Fork," have been used in the past 150 years to describe this particular body of water.

To the Saline Branch Drainage District commissioners, the technical name of this stream is the "Saline Branch Drainage Ditch." At least one lawyer associated with the drainage district has questioned the motivation for the change, suggesting that it's an environmentalist ploy to repackaging as some sort of natural resource a drainage ditch created for the sole purpose of rendering the area's naturally waterlogged land suitable for farming.

Although it's certainly true that the Saline has been altered by the human residents of the area, this is not to say that the Saline is a human creation.

The stream that was dredged to create the Saline Ditch was, and is, the westernmost tributary of the Salt Fork, which meandered through the area long before human settlement to join the Middle Fork and flow into the Vermilion River.

There are precious few moving bodies of water in the Midwest that haven't been altered in one way or another by humans, but simply altering them is not a license to call them names that belie their true nature. If by convention a ditch is a product of human excavation, then the Saline Ditch isn't technically speaking a ditch at all because it follows its natural course over most of its length. For that matter, it's not even saline — the name probably derives from the fact that it branches off the Salt Fork, which near its junction with the Middle Fork outside of Danville was close to salt springs, which were an attrac-

tion for early settlers.

Many people choose to live near the Saline because this land contains some of the richest, most diverse natural communities in Champaign County.

The stream itself houses a tremendous variety of aquatic animals and the land along its banks provides a refuge for many species native to the region. To cite one entomological example, about 20 years ago, the willows along the bank near the I-74 overpass on Perkins Road yielded a species of gall-forming sawfly previously unknown to science.

There is far more to the Saline than agricultural runoff, and its political name, "Saline Branch Drainage Ditch," misrepresents not only its origins but also its present multiplicity of functions.

Long before the first garden was planted in Champaign County, black swallowtails flew along the stream, going about their business without any assistance from humans. Even today throughout the county the vast majority of these caterpillars aren't found anywhere near parsley — parsley's a European plant restricted to backyard gardens in this part of the world. The name "parsleyworm," although descriptive under some circumstances, is at best imprecise; it says more about the values and attitudes of garnish-guarding gardeners than about the nature of the creature itself.

By the same token, a community that calls a stream a "ditch" is dismissing a valuable natural resource as nothing more than a single-purpose drain.

I have been baffled by the name "Saline Ditch" for the 27 years I've lived along its banks and heartily endorse "West Salt Fork" as the far more descriptive, far more euphonious, and far less politicized name.

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