



the
CRAYFISH TALE
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CRAYFISH SPECIES

When I first started paying attention to crayfish, they all looked the same. No wonder. In Sweden, at that time at least, they were all the same. They were called *Astacus astacus*. That was the name for those crays that populated Sweden and much of Europe. So there was no question about which species you were catching, cooking or eating. Later on, after the crayfish plague had decimated large populations of the *Astacus astacus*, people who thought they knew better, imported the California species we call the Signal crayfish, and then there were two species in Sweden.

Then I came to the US. What a difference. There are, reportedly, over 350 separate species of crayfish in this country. At first this fact did not bother me one bit. For years I did not even know of their existence in the US, and I was too busy trying to become an American to care.

Then I discovered crayfish in Phoenix. But now the confusion started. As I swept the sides of the Phoenix irrigation canals with my long-poled landing net, I discovered at first a type of crayfish wearing a reddish shell and long narrow claws. Caught, cooked and served I found they tasted almost like the ones I had found in my home country. But then one day, in

another part of the Phoenix canals, I came across a different type of crayfish that looked just the same as the Swedish ones I had previously learned to love catching and eating. This was the plumper looking cray, with dark green/gray shells and with claws that were worth cracking for their meat. Now I became much more interested.

I had now found two varieties, the long clawed red swamp crawfish (*Procambarus clarkii*) and the *Orconectes virilis* that looked more like the ones I knew from way back. Now there were only 348 more species to go.

But I have seen pictures of dozens of those other species of crayfish. Basically, to me at least, they all look the same. They are all decapods, ten legged ones, with two of the legs enlarged into claws that can give you nasty pinches if you don't watch out. I have great difficulty telling them apart.

Not so with us humans, known taxonomically as *Homo sapiens* which is the only living species in the *Homo* genus. Yet, in the species of *Homo Sapiens* we have numerous variations. And within the single species we humans belong to, there is plenty of cross breeding going on. Thus we are by definition just one, single species. Within this species, there are dif-

ferences in eyes, nose shapes, skin color and much more. We have no difficulties identifying many of these ethnic characteristics.

But these 350 species of crayfish can not procreate. That's what makes them separate species. Yes, some of these different species look somewhat different, but, in my opinion, most crayfish, no matter what species they are supposed to belong to, look the same. Mostly at least. To find the differences that make them a different species, you need to become indiscretely inquisitive.

But tell me this, how on earth do biologists and scientists, who are knowledgeable about these critters, determine that all these specimens of the 350 separate crayfish species can not mate? That must take a lot of detailed and intensive study over long periods of time. Yet, that's what they have determined. All these separate crayfish species can not produce offspring except within their own species. It is hard to believe by a person who is really only interested in whether crayfish are good to eat or not.

Checking my sources for what happened to the other species under Homo, such as Homo neanderthalis, Homo erectus and Homo habilis, I find that they simply died out leaving us all alone in the genus Homo. And we have been alone since the last Neanderthaler gave up the ghost at least 20,000 years ago. Or so they say.

Then, after all these years while believing that I belonged to Homo "thinking" sapiens, I now find out that I actually belong to a sub species called Homo sapiens sapiens. We who can think twice as much? That apparently excludes some remnants of the old Homo sapiens, such as the Australian aborigines. Or does it?

But how do you differentiate between the 350 separate species of crayfish? Well, I have come to the conclusion that with some notable exceptions, you simply can't tell the difference without intrusive inspection at, in some cases, their most intimate parts. And if there is a difference, so what? My criteria for accepting them remains how well they let me catch them, cook them and eat them. And I really don't care much to what species they belong. Do I?

Some crayfish species, however, are indeed so different that even an uninitiated crayfish catcher can see the difference. Take my favorite crayfish, for instance, the West Coast Signal crayfish, also referred to as *Pacifastacus leniusculus*. This one is not called Signal crayfish for nothing. On its claws are two significant spots of light color which we call the Signal. Apart from this, they look just like the popular crayfish anywhere else. Then take a look at the Rusty crayfish (*Orconectes rusticus*). Although the Rusty seems identical to the Signal, it has no bright spots on its claws but is in most other respects the same as a Signal. I have already mentioned the long clawed red swamp crawfish (*Procambarus clarkia*) which is very easy to identify. It is also the most common crayfish since it is the main catch down in Louisiana.

But beyond these few species of the 350 that there are, they mostly look the same, and when I go fishing in the Arizona mountains, I am perfectly happy knowing that the broad clawed, dark brown/green crays I pull up with my Trapper Arne traps in these lakes are supposed to be the *Orconectes virilis*, because they look the same, and they cook the same and they taste the same, so as far as I am concerned, they are the same. And they taste great.