

From a superfluity of nuns came one who left us 'nouns of multitude'



Laurie Bauer

WATCH YOUR LANGUAGE

HISTORY has left us very little information about Juliana Berners or Barnes, Prioress of Sopewell nunnery near St Albans in the 15th century. She seems, however, to have been one of the first women to have been published writing about hunting and fishing. Her work was published in *The Book of St Albans*, probably published in 1486, although she must have been dead by that time.

Among her other claims to fame, she is one of the first to have left us lists of collective nouns for people and animals, many of which are familiar today. She calls these "nouns of multitude" and includes in her list a herd of deer, swans, cranes or wrens, a bevy of ladies, a muster of peacocks, a watch of nightingales and a superfluity of nuns.

We might think that such nouns show a great deal of fantasy, and are probably the work of some wit (or generations of them, building on a common pattern), yet some of these terms are attested from earlier in the 15th century, and they have been handed down as the "correct" words for 600 years without the basis for their correctness having been seriously called into question.

This is despite the fact that we know from our own experience that people will add freely to the set, perhaps most recently with a gaggle of gays. Perhaps, one day, that will become the accepted collective, too.

In the meantime, we have a pride of lions and a leap of leopards, and a kindle of kittens (although the *Oxford English Dictionary* suggests that the last of these is no longer in use). Clowder, sometime used of cats, seems to be related to the word clutter, which makes some kind of sense if they are about to be fed.



Collectively speaking: A murder of crows hunkers down for the night.

Photo: REUTERS

What do ladies, larks, quails (quail?) and roes have in common that they all share the collective noun bevy? It seems particularly odd since "bevy" would seem to have something to do with drinking, etymologically speaking.

The collective for bears is a sloth: perhaps they were only seen together while hibernating, for they can be very fast at other times.

Grouse, partridges and ptarmigans collect in coveys, pheasants in nyes (or nides, in earlier centuries also eyes), woodcocks in falls (although that does not seem to be used much).

WE HAVE a chattering of choughs, a murder of crows (the *OED* has no record of this between the 15th century and the 20th), a charm of finches (and possibly of bees), an exaltation of larks and a parliament of owls. Some of these have alternatives as well.

A shrewdness of apes is surely, as suggested by the *OED*, not a real collective term at all. Yet it persists in some modern reference works.

There are websites that list hundreds of these words, and there is even a bookful of them. The best are not established words, but made up on the spot. I like a number of mathematicians,

a babble of linguists, a body of pathologists. But the wittiest I have come across are the answers to the question: "What do you call a collection of prostitutes?" There are at least four answers: a jam of tarts, a flourish of strumpets, a whored of prostitutes and an anthology of pros. Have fun making up your own.

It is not clear whether we should count words showing groupings of inanimate objects as the same phenomenon as the groupings of birds, animals and humans. We certainly have some very specific words for collections of inanimate objects.

A flight of stairs seems very odd – otherwise we have a flight of birds or a flight of (military) planes (a flight of fancy is not a collective). We can have a chain of islands, but otherwise, islands exist as an archipelago, and we don't say "an archipelago of islands". Mountains come in ranges, pearls come in ropes and drinks in rounds.

Again the potential for invention seems considerable: what would you call a collection of old newspapers or trinkets or pen-drives? Some of these slots are still up for grabs.

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