

Murders, Ambushes and Prides: Oh My! By Morgan Barnes

Everyone's favorite party fact is that a group of crows is called a murder--well, it is if you're an animal nerd like me. A murder of crows, a bloom of jellyfish, a pride of lions, where did all these animal group names come from? Why can't we just call it a group and be done with it?

These names came from a time when ordinary people had a much closer relationship with animals in their daily lives. Anyone who owns cats understands how a group of cats could be called a 'glaring', and anyone who has had a cockroach problem can understand why a group of

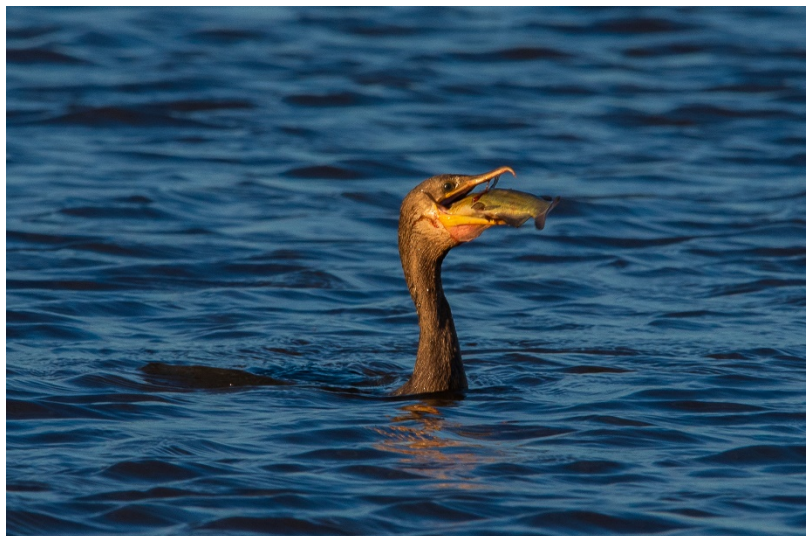
cockroaches would be called an intrusion. And one can certainly imagine why a group of porcupines is called a prickle, or a group of rhinoceroses called a crash. But why are there names like a murder of crows, an ambush of tigers, or a pride of lions?

Many of the names we use today (and don't use) originate from a collection of essays written in 1486. In an essay on hunting, written by Dame Julia Berners, the author discusses group names for animals. Because of the hunting focus, many of these collective nouns relate to characteristics of the animals that may have been helpful to hunters' understanding of their target species.

Collective nouns like an ambush of tigers reminded hunters that while you are hunting the tiger, the tiger might also be hunting you: tigers use an ambush strategy in which they lie in wait until their prey is nearby and unaware, and then they pounce. Other collective nouns, like a gulp of cormorants, also relate to a characteristic behavior of the species: cormorants are fishing birds, who are known to gulp down whole fish in one swallow. A group of hyenas is called a cackle, for their distinctive laughing vocalizations.

Collective nouns for animal groups can also be based on physical characteristics, like a tower of giraffes (although this brings to mind a stack of giraffes, which is a fun mental image!). A group of peacocks is called an ostentation, for the colorful, showy feathers of the male bird.

Sometimes, a collective noun is based more on the personality of the animal. For example, a group of buffalo is called an obstinacy, likely due to their reputation of being stubborn and hard to control. Sometimes, these strange collective nouns don't seem so strange unless we think more deeply about them. No other group of animals is called a pride, except for lions. Perhaps



A cormorant about to 'gulp' a fish whole, the behavior for which a gulp of cormorants originates; photographed at Brazoria National Wildlife Refuge by Morgan Barnes

the term arises from our impression that lions are regal creatures, or that hunting a lion was something to be proud of.

Of course, I would be remiss to leave out the most famous of strange animal collective nouns: a murder of crows. There is not one agreed upon explanation for this name, but I will describe a few. One potential explanation is that crows were heavily present during the Plague, and their association with death and disease led to this name.

Another theory says that a group of crows will sometimes kill an intruder crow, something we might consider murder. Finally, some say that the term murder is related to their harsh, rowdy calls. While many of these terms have fallen out of use, it's fun and interesting to consider how they came to be. Next time you're outside, look for an animal you see often, and think about what you might call a group of that species!