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A Barrel of Monkeys: A Compendium of Collective Nouns for Animals

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What should we call the wild animals we spot from our windows? A surfeit of skunks? A dray of squirrels? A patient watch of wildlife enthusiasts might even catch sight of a skulk of foxes or a scavenging sloth of bears. The practice of inventing collective nouns for animals is an ancient pastime which derives from medieval hunts, but the list has been augmented in every age—and it remains an entertaining pastime today.

A Barrel of Monkeys brings together more than one hundred collective nouns for animals, from a bloat of hippopotamuses to a caravan of camels, a tower of giraffes, and a leap of leopards. The rivalry between male rhinoceroses becomes especially apt when the rowdy ungulates are characterized as a crash of rhinos. An ambush of tigers is an apt characterization of the skillful hunters that silently stalk their prey. A blend of wordplay, puns, and alliteration, some of the terms collected here are now commonplace, like a pride of lions. Others aren't heard much these days, but many—like a dazzle of zebras or a prickle of porcupines—richly deserve a comeback.

With charming illustrations by the eighteenth-century artist and naturalist Thomas Bewick, *A Barrel of Monkeys* is the perfect follow-up to *A Conspiracy of Ravens*, the Bodleian Library's book of bird words. Not even a crash of rhinos can stop readers from smiling at this second collection.

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