

AN EXALTATION OF LARKS

by William E. Davis, Jr., Foxborough

Not long ago, at a flea market, I happened across a marvelous little book, An Exaltation of Larks by James Lipton (1977, Viking Press, New York), which I have found to be delightful and provocative. The book deals in a charming way with those words that describe a group of some sort, referred to variously as "nouns of multitude," "company terms," "collective nouns," "group terms," "terms of venery," or my favorite - "nouns of assemblage." We are all familiar with the most common of these nouns of assemblage, for example, a school of fish, a covey of quail, a flock of sheep, a bouquet of flowers, to name but a few. Most people are familiar, as well, with some of the less commonplace nouns such as a pride of lions, a kit of foxes, or even some that describe inanimate objects, such as a cluster of stars, but I was unprepared for the enormous number of such nouns that deal with birds! Some are still so commonplace that you don't even think about them: a brood of hens, a covey of partridges, a flock of birds, a clutch of eggs. Others, which are more uncommon, are, as Lipton described them, ". . . authentic and authoritative. They were used, they were correct, and they are useful, correct - and available - today." He lists a murder of crows, a rafter of turkeys, a walk of snipe, a fall of woodcock, a dule of doves, a wedge of swans, a party of jays, a company of parrots, a colony of penguins, a covey of coots, a sord of mallards, a peep of chickens, a pytting of turtle doves, a paddling of ducks, a seige of herons, a charm of finches, a skein of geese (flying), a gaggle of geese (sitting), a tidning of magpies, a cast of hawks, a deceit of lapwings, an ostentation of peacocks, a bouquet of pheasants, a congregation of plovers, an unkindness of ravens, a building of rooks, a host of sparrows, a descent of woodpeckers, a mustering of storks, a flight of swallows, a watch of nightingales, a murmuration of starlings, a spring of teal, a parliament of owls, a dissimulation of birds and, of course, an exaltation of larks.

The origin of these nouns of assemblage dates back in many cases to the fifteenth century, when "social primers" or "books of courtesy" often contained lists of these nouns, usually associated with hunting, that were part of the proper gentleman's vocabulary. Since that time hundreds of these colorful expressions have been coined. In fact, inventing witty or interesting nouns of assemblage has become a great semantical game. Some of these nouns describe the sounds produced by a group of the animal described, such as a gaggle of geese, or the behavior of the group - a paddling of ducks or a wedge of swans, or a general comment as in a parliament of owls.

These fascinating terms are much more common than I had ever supposed, and since reading Lipton's book, I now seem to find them everywhere. I recently was reading one of William Beebe's natural history books, High Jungle, and found a grace of tree ferns mentioned, a term not recorded by Lipton. I even found that I had published one of my own without realizing it in an article in the Naturalist Magazine, when I had described a half-dozen dumpy, yellow, black, and white birds actively feeding in a shrub laden with flowers as a tumble of Bananaquits! Once,

in Panama, I was seized by another fit of "nourning" as I watched a dozen or so toucans in the canopy of a tree. I couldn't stop myself: a schnozzle of toucans. It is an insidious word game that even lends itself to punning: a gulp of swallows, for example.

If you should ever run across James Lipton's little book, be sure to buy it. This volume demonstrates the brilliantly interwoven fabric of the history of language and the richness of the English tongue, and above all, invites the reader to join ". . . a game that amateur semanticists have been playing for over five hundred years."

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An Auction of Natural History Items

The South Shore Regional Office of the Massachusetts Audubon Society and W. Torrey Little, Inc., Auctioneer, are presenting an auction of natural history materials in August of 1985. This will be a full day dedicated to the resale of quality items that relate to our natural world. There are already two John James Audubon prints (Havell) and a set of *Birds of Massachusetts* (Forbush) committed to the auction.

This is an opportunity for you to consign any item that you have that is of reasonable value. It is presumed that first edition books, collections of field guides, works of art and other similar items will be gathered. The consignor will receive 90 percent of the hammer price for those items over \$500 in value and 85 percent for items under \$500. A 10 percent fee will be charged to the purchaser above the hammer price. Any items donated outright to the Society will be valued at the hammer price and are tax-deductible.

Please call the Massachusetts Audubon Society's South Shore Regional Office at (617) 837-9400 for information on entering pieces in the auction.

Catalogs should be available two or three weeks ahead of time. There will be a printing and mailing fee for the catalog. W. Torrey Little, Inc. will donate all proceeds, above expenses to the Society.



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