In any etymological construction of words, each ou, perhaps?

Ramona J. Quincunx

In the May 1973 issue of Word Ways, David L. Silverman posed the problem of finding common names of mammals beginning with each of the 26 letters of the alphabet. For reasons not entirely clear, flying or gliding mammals such as bats and flying lemurs, and aquatic mammals such as seals and whales, were excluded from consideration.

Properly generalized and defined, and systematically approached, the problem is an interesting one, bringing into play a variety of methods for assessing the commonness of different words, as well as drawing significantly on one's resources in conquering the most difficult letters. The long, cold night down here in Little America, Antarctica, has given me ample opportunity to ponder the problem and to devise the following solution to it:

A = ASS (1) J = JACKAL (2) R = RAT (1)
B = BEAR (1) K = KANGAROO (2) S = SQUIRREL (1)
C = CAT (1) L = LION (1) T = TIGER (1)
D = DOG (1) M = MOUSE (1) U = URCHIN (3)
E = ELEPHANT (1) N = NAG (2) V = VICUNA (2)
F = FOX (1) O = OX (1) W = WOLF (1)
G = GOAT (1) P = PIC (1) X = XENURINE (6)
H = HORSE (1) Q = QUAGGA (3) Y = YAK (2)
I = IBEX (2) Z = ZEBRA (2)

In addition to respecting Mr. Silverman's proscription against flyers and swimmers, I have imposed five other reasonable restrictions on the selection process:

1. All names must be solidly-written, single-word names. The NINE-BANDED ARMADILLO does not qualify for inclusion in the list.
2. All names must be those of mammals now living. Extinct or fossil animals such as the MAMMOTH are out of bounds.
3. All names must be popular as opposed to scientific. Genus names only, such as EQUUS, are taboo.
4. All names must be those of particular mammals. Words designating broad groups -- QUADRUPED, CARNIVORE, UNGULATE, FELID -- are not allowed.
5. All names must be general. Names applicable only to males, or females, or young -- TOMCAT, VIXEN, PUPPY -- are prohibited.

The list of names presented above complies with all of these conditions.
Following 16 of the 26 names is the number (1). These 16 words may be regarded as part of our everyday language, the commonest words in the list. Each one is included in the list of the 6,000 most common English words as given in An English-French-German-Spanish Word Frequency Dictionary, compiled by Helen S. Eaton (Dover Publications, Inc., New York, 1961). The original edition of this work was issued by the Committee on Modern Languages of the American Council on Education, making its credentials impeccable.

Another 7 names on the list, those followed by the number (2), are distinctly less common, but still very common, reflected by the fact that all of them appear in one of the smallest dictionaries currently published: The New Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary, a paperback well-known to readers of Word Ways. In a few instances where alternative choices from that dictionary were available, personal judgment was invoked to make a choice. For instance, the word JACKAL "sounds" more common to me than does its alternative JAGUAR. My choice was subsequently confirmed by the discovery that the much smaller original publication, The Merriam-Webster Pocket Dictionary, with only 25,000 entries, includes JACKAL but omits JAGUAR. The 45,000 vocabulary entries in the present dictionary represent only about 1 1/2% of all English words.

Two words, QUAGGA and URCHIN, are followed by a (3). That number indicates a comparatively slight further retreat from the ideal of absolute commonness. The terms have been taken from the Thorndike-Barnhart High School Dictionary, by E.L. Thorndike and Clarence L. Barnhart, Fourth Edition (Doubleday & Company, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1965). It may rightly be inferred that one does not need a college education to be familiar with QUAGGA (a kind of wild ass) or with URCHIN (the hedgehog).

One word, XENURINE, has been assigned the number (6). To find any qualifying name beginning with the letter X, it was necessary to make a quantum jump, skipping over level number (4) -- collegiate dictionaries -- and level number (5) -- the Second and Third Editions of Webster's Unabridged -- and go to the Funk & Wagnalls Unabridged. There, one finds the XENURINE, a kind of armadillo more commonly known as the "tatuay" or "cabassou".

Assembling the list has not been without its problems, and the information about the names given in dictionaries has required careful evaluation. A discussion follows, interesting more as illustrative of difficulties often encountered in etymological research than for the specifics involved.

NAG. At first glance, this does not seem like an ordinary animal name. After all, a "nag" is normally called a "horse". Yet, the first definition of NAG in the pocket dictionary is as an exact synonym for HORSE. Good enough!

OX. The smallest of the dictionaries we are using, the pocket diction-
The 16 words commonest 1,000 most German-Spanish Dover Publishing this work American.

Number (2), as suggested by the entries currently, a paper-

ences where personal judg-

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aguar. The

ed carefully of the World by Ivan T. Sanderson (Hanover House, Garden City, N. Y., circa 1960) states that wild examples of the quagga are constantly re-

ported from South-West Africa.

Urchin. Thorndike-Barnhart labels the word archaic or dialectal. While this label does not run afoul of any of the rules, it is nevertheless undesirable. We override it by consulting Webster’s Third Edition, which gives the meaning of “hedgehog” as standard English.

Xenurine. The word, both an adjective and a noun, is derived from the genus name Xenurus, apparently violating Rule No. 4. Appear-

ces can be deceptive. Webster’s Third Edition comes to our rescue once more, informing us that the tatouay or cabassou is the only mem-

ber of the genus Xenurus or Cabassous. In this case, therefore, the name Xenurine is that of a particular mammal: there is none other to which it can be applied.

For comparative purposes, I have made a similar study of bird names. My list follows:

A = Albatross (2) J = Jay (2) R = Robin (1)
B = Blackbird (1) K = Kingfisher (2) S = Stork (1)
C = Crow (1) L = Lark (1) T = Turkey (1)
D = Duck (1) M = Magpie (2) U = Umbrette (4)
E = Eagle (1) N = Nightingale (1) V = Vulture (2)
F = Falcon (1) O = Owl (1) W = Woodpecker (1)
G = Goose (1) P = Parrot (1) X = Xeme (6)
H = Hawk (1) Q = Quail (2) Y = Yellowhammer (3)
I = Ibis (2) Z = Zoozoo (5)

An analysis of the results shows that they are slightly less favorable than those obtained for mammals, not unexpected because birds are a little further removed from our lives than are mammals. Instead of 16 names from Eaton’s work, there are only 15. Instead of 23 names on the first two levels, there are only 22. Instead of only 1 name from be-

ond the third level, there are three such names.

On level No. 3, the Yellowhammer, a common European finch, is from the Thorndike-Barnhart dictionary. On level No. 4, the Um-
BRETTE, an African wading bird also called "umber" and "hammerhead", is from the Funk & Wagnalls Standard College Dictionary (New York, 1963). On level No. 5, the ZOOZOO or ringdove is from Webster's Third Edition. On level No. 6, the XEME, a fork-tailed gull of arctic regions, is from the unabridged Funk & Wagnalls dictionary. Again, the letter X has proved the toughest one to conquer.

While the bird list is a little less common than the mammal list, there is only one undesirable word in it: ZOOZOO, listed as "dialectal" in the Third Edition, as "local" in the Second Edition, and as "provincial" in the Funk & Wagnalls unabridged. I selected it on the basis of its etymology (imitative, therefore English), which classifies it as more common than alternative choices: ZOPILOTE, from Nahuatl; ZUISIN, from Algonquian. In a general way, words of English or Old English origin tend to be more common than those of Latin origin, which tend to be more common than those of Greek origin, which tend to be more common than those of other origins.

Similar studies can be made of other living groups, including fishes, reptiles, insects, flowers, and trees. I hope to engage in such studies in the months to come, with subsequent reports on my findings to readers of Word Ways.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

This is the title of a logical satire which appeared in the September 1973 issue of Mad Magazine, extending the concept of kangaroo words to personal names. Mentioned in the November 1968 Word Ways, kangaroo words contain their own synonyms, such as columnIES and BLOssOMS. Mad readers can chuckle over such kangaroo names as WILLIAM fulbRIGHT, senAtOr mcGOvern, geORge wallACE, and mOshe daYan.

Try it on your own name and see what you come up with!

SEX AND BABIES

Have you ever noticed the connection between sex and babies?

Yes, there is a connection. To discover it, replace each letter of each word by its numerical position in our alphabet (A = 1, B = 2, and so on). You will find that, both in the word SEX and in the word BABIES, the value of the final letter equals the sum of the values of all preceding letters:

SEX: 19 + 5 = 24
BABIES: 2 + 1 + 2 + 9 + 5 = 19