VENERABLE VENERY

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If you thumb through your standard deskside dictionary, you may be shocked to learn that venery is a euphemistic term describing coital commerce.

To stem any blazing tide of flaming pens charging us with smut, sensationalism, prurience and suchlike, let us assure you that our topic concerns another -- wholly respectable -- interpretation of the word.

In times ago, venery -- as applied to hunting -- was commonly used to describe the sport of hunting, the art and thrill of the chase. Eventually, its meaning expanded to include the objects of this sport ... the beasts themselves. Finally, it came to describe the curious logological practice of assigning specific words to denote particular multitudes or aggregations of specific animals. Some familiar venerie expressions: a gaggle of geese, a pride of lions, a covey of quail. To be precise, "gaggle" refers only to geese while on the ground ... when in flight, they are a "skein".

In the two columns below, we've listed several animals, along with their venerie descriptions. How many can you pair up?

1. a sleuth of a. owls  
2. a murder of b. foxes  
3. a skulk of c. peacocks  
4. a leap of d. fish  
5. a building (or clamor) of e. goldfinches  
6. a fesnyng of f. kangaroos  
7. a charm of g. larks  
8. an exaltation of h. plovers  
9. a congregation of i. bears  
10. a troop of j. crows  
11. a school of k. rooks  
12. a parliament of l. chickens  
13. a peep of m. apes  
14. an ostentation of n. leopards  
15. a shrewdness of o. ferrets

But why limit such imagination to beasts of prey? Why not extend our horizons to embrace all things ... people ... places ... activities ... inanimate objects ... the heavens themselves?

Attempts have been made along these lines, of course, resulting in such welcome additions to the language as a bunch of bananas ... a peal of bells ... a fleet, squadron, angel.
of bells ... a horde of savages ... a bench of bishops or jurists ... a fleet, squadron or flotilla of ships ... a clutch of eggs ... a host of angels ... a rope of onions.

In a moment of whimsy, we compiled our own list of venereal morsels, which we are delighted to share with you ... again, if you can find the proper pairings:

1. a rash of
2. a mountain of
3. a gob of
4. a culture of
5. a shock of
6. a pride of
7. a collection of
8. a slew of
9. a babble of
10. a pile of
11. a ream of
12. a slug of
13. a crush of
14. a parcel of
15. a raft of

a. oranges
b. worms
c. electricians
d. numismatists
e. posts
f. poison ivy
g. uranium
h. pipe-cleaners
i. sailors
j. lifeboats
k. biologists
l. authorship
m. tongues
n. Goliaths
o. Mohamets

Answers can be found in Answers and Solutions at the end of this issue. For readers who wish to pursue the topic of venery further, read Willard Espy's "The Venereal Game" in the February 1975 Word Ways, in which he coins names for prostitutes, or James Lipton's excellent book An Exaltation of Larks (Penguin Books, 1977), reviewed in the November 1978 Word Ways.

KUDOS FOR WORD WAYS


This delightful publication deserves a great deal more attention than its circulation indicates. Articles promote word study as pure enjoyment although frequently they are the result of lengthy study. Any library serving clients 15 years of age and older should prominently display the title. Teachers will want to consult every issue for ideas to stimulate students' interest in language and thinking. Highly recommended.