

Glas y dorlan ('blue of the bank') evokes the vivid streak of colour that's a kingfisher disappearing upstream



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What's in a name?

Names evolve from encounters, and tell us a lot about how we've interacted with our fellow-beings over time. In an article written especially for this magazine, **Ben Stammers** explores some linguistic encounters between people and wildlife.

There's a game where you act out an animal for others to guess. I remember a friend's four-year-old son once taking a turn: he ran into the room, flapped his arms and shouted "Cuckoo! Cuckoo!" What could we do but smile and cuckoo back? Human mimicry of birdsong, like the re-enactment of animals in painting, has probably been around as long as we have, and onomatopoeic wildlife names may well be the oldest, as well as the most simply evocative. 'Cuckoo', 'chiffchaff' and 'kittiwake' (or *Crex*, the Latin name for the corncrake, or 'utick', an old name for whinchat) all do exactly what they say on the tin. And you can literally call up a tawny owl by standing in a wood at night and calling out its vernacular Welsh name: *gwdihw!*

I'd always assumed that 'curlew' (a word/bird loved by poets like W B Yeats and Dylan Thomas) was another sound-echo, but apparently it comes from the old French *courli* – a messenger. The name now seems inseparable from the call, which itself speaks to us of wild, open habitat – moorland or estuary; though maybe lowland meadows or farmland for our forebears. Curlews also have *curling bills* – somehow, in the slippery evolution of language, this bird's name has ended up not only sounding like how it sounds, but also how it looks.

And good accidents can happen. Whilst leading a school nature walk this summer, the kids and I enjoyed listening to a Cetti's warbler (named after an eighteenth-century Italian zoologist) proclaiming loudly from a reedbed. When the class later emailed over their homework based on our trip, several of them had charmingly mis-heard it as a 'chatty warbler' – a name it would live up to.

Shearwaters and turnstones certainly live up to their beautifully active verb-name, as do 'puffing pigs' (porpoises), whilst you could argue that 'swift' is the most apt adjective-name for any creature. But when it comes to conjuring up an encounter and a context, some of the Welsh names lead the field: *tafod y gors* ('tongue of the bog') recalls the shape, stickiness and even the predatory, carnivorous nature of butterwort, as well as its habitat; whilst *sgrech y coed* ('screech of the wood') re-enacts the physical experience of a jay that most of us have – we're in a wood, we hear a screech: job done. *Glas y dorlan* ('blue of the bank') similarly evokes the vivid streak of colour that's a kingfisher disappearing upstream; and *socan eira* ('snow sock') is a great name for that harbinger of wintry weather, the fieldfare. These names put us straight into the place and the moment.

A Welsh rook is a corn-crow (*ydran*) and a raven a meat-crow (*cigfran*), whilst a cormorant is a donkey-crow (*mulfran*) – referring to its guttural cry. But evocative as *mulfran* is, it's only my fourth favourite Welsh name for the cormorant. *Bilidowcar* (also the title of a Welsh kids' TV programme in the 1970s and 80s) remains the most commonly used, but two other local names show similar affection for a bird that's clearly a 'character': *Wil Wal Waliog* and the plural *hen lanciau Llandudno* ('old bachelors of Llandudno'). The cormorant colony on the cliffs of Rhiwledyn on the Little Orme is still one of the largest in Wales, and the name conjures an image of old boys loitering around the town's beaches, drying their wings between salty adventures.

There's an infectious fondness in the use of an actual name for familiar creatures – e.g. 'Jenny wren' or, in Welsh, *titw Tomos las* ('Tom tit'), *Robyn sbonc* (grasshopper), *Siani flewog* (woolly-bear caterpillar) and *Jac y baglau* (daddy long-legs). These names make them almost part of the family, and speak of a time when people and wildlife were physically (and perhaps emotionally?)



Curlew – a bird that happens to sound like its name?



Bog myrtle © PAUL HARRIS

JAY © PETER CARIRNS 2020/VISION, CURLEW © DAMIAN WATERS

closer. Like-wise nicknames, which certain species seem to accumulate – bird's-foot trefoil, for example, whose various aliases include 'fairy gorse', 'tom thumb', 'egg-and-bacon', 'granny's toenails' and *pŷs y ceirw* (deer's peas). There are apparently 250 local names for woodlice, including 'cheesy-bob', 'chucky-pig', 'billy-baker' and 'granfer-gravy' ... and, in Welsh, *pry lludw* (ash bug) and *gwrach y coed* (wood witch).

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customs or beliefs. Numerous plant names, for example, bear witness to medicinal uses now largely forgotten: 'woundwort', 'lousewort', 'toothwort', 'self-heal', 'heartsease' and 'tormentil', to name only a few. A hierarchical world-view is seen in names like the dingy footman moth, or 'plover's page' for dunlin, and superstition surely lies behind terms like 'goatsucker' for nightjar (which nevertheless makes it into the Latin name – *Caprimulgus*). As a creature

of dusk seen hawking low around edges of pasture, was the nightjar framed for someone else's milk-theft?

Seasonal phenomena were important markers for people closely tied to the land. We see their intertwining in names like 'cuckoo's mate' for wryneck – both birds arrive in spring and disappear in autumn – or the Welsh *clychau'r gôg* (cuckoo's bells) for bluebells, whose flowering coincided with the cuckoo's call (though climate change may now be pushing them out of sync). And the religious lens of a pre-scientific world is evident in names like 'St Mark's fly' (which hatches around 25 April – St Mark's Day), 'devil's-bit scabious', 'devil's coach horse' and an old name for swift, 'swing devil'. There are numerous mentions of the Virgin Mary in Welsh names – *helygen Fair* (Mary's willow) for bog-myrtle, *clustog Fair* (Mary's pillow) for thrift, *briallu Mair* (Mary's primrose) for cowslip and *cragen Fair* (Mary's shell) for cowrie – testament to a pre-Reformation Catholic Wales that's little spoken of today.

Indigenous names for habitat often resist translation, and can seem evocative precisely because they're so tied to their geographical origins – *jungle* is Sanskrit; *tundra* Sami; *steppe* Russian; *pampas* Quechua; *garrigue* Occitan; *maquis* Corsican; *mire* and *fjord* Norse; *heath*, *fen* and *marsh* Old English and so on. The Welsh words *ffridd* and *rhôs* are increasingly familiar to non-Welsh-speaking ecologists, as they helpfully describe specific habitats for which there are no equivalent terms in English (scrubby or partly-wooded, sloping semi-upland; and damp, nutrient-poor, species-rich pasture respectively).

Language matters, and we have a responsibility when we're in a position to name things. There's

Bog myrtle is 'Mary's willow' (helygen Fair) in Welsh – harking back to a Pre-Reformation Wales?

a bleak irony in seeing a wild species or habitat destroyed and then replaced by something bearing its name. Housing estates called 'Skylark Meadows' or 'Nightingale Grove' are examples – the words become ghosts, condemned to signify their own non-existence. Personally, I fear that the word 'wild' itself faces a similar fate if it starts to become used as a kind of brand or marketing tag. Putting the words 'my' and 'wild' together, for example, as even The Wildlife Trusts often do (including in this very magazine!), is arguably not only an oxymoron (if something's wild, you don't own it) but could also suggest that wildness is a consumable lifestyle choice. If 'wild' becomes too fluffy and friendly, it loses its rightly unsettling meaning – are we, in striving for marketplace recognition as a conservation movement, sometimes guilty of this word-domestication?

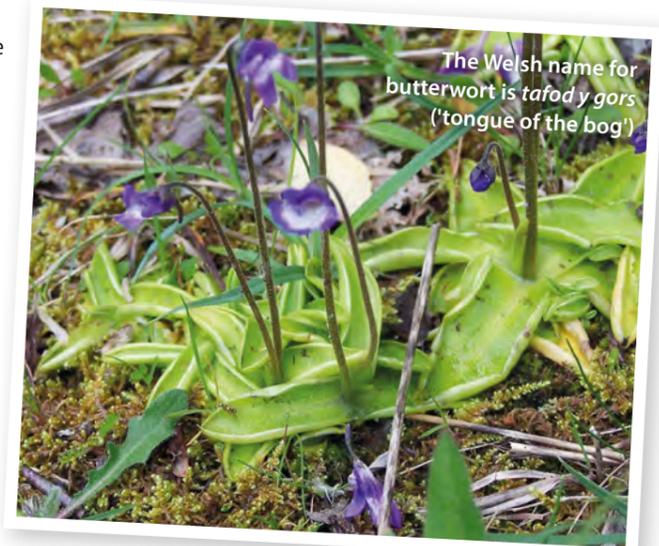
Despite taxonomic standardisation, names continue to mutate and evolve in the way people use and play with them. Volunteering at Bardsey Bird Observatory as a teenager exposed me to 'manxies', 'mipits', 'moggies', 'gropplers', 'sprogs', 'seggies' and 'spadgers', for example – all affectionate shortenings of, or nicknames for species commonly seen there. Later, as a warden on Fair Isle, I heard competitive birders boasting their familiarity with very rare migrants by deliberately casual abbreviation – 'lancey' for a lanceolated warbler, or 'pech' for a pechora pipit etc. I was also introduced to the islanders' Norse names for seabirds, some of which I still use now: *tystie* seems a more characterful name than 'black guillemot' for such a classic bird of the northern, windswept isles, and *bonxie* seems more aptly brutal than

'great skua' for that menacing pirate-bird.

Names emerge from experience, in whatever language. 'Bum barrel', 'huck-muck', 'mum ruffin', 'bottle tit', 'jug pot' and 'bush oven' are folk-names for the long-tailed tit, all referring to its wonderful domed nest woven from spider-silk, feathers, moss and lichen – names which would make sense to people who'd come across the nest in their daily lives. Nowadays, most of us are unlikely to ever see one – unless we're out volunteering with the Wildlife Trust on a winter scrub-bashing task! *Llafn y bladur* ('blade of the scythe') comes from the shape of bog asphodel's leaf, and has the authentic ring of a farm-hand's observation. 'Collier' for the soot-dark swift and 'butcher-bird' for red-backed shrike, which impales prey on thorns, also hint at shared experience. And an old French name for jay, *le planteur* (referring to its role in re-generating woodland by burying and forgetting acorns), even suggests comradeship with a fellow-worker. It recalls for me the intimacy and empathy with which the great English countryside poet John Clare wrote about the creatures he encountered in his daily work as a farm labourer.

Perhaps that's the point. Rather than mourn the loss of wildlife-name diversity, can we address the loss of shared experience out of which the words were born? Can we rebuild that intimate connection with nature? I've been involved in outdoor education for many years, and would love to see it embraced as part of the mainstream – I'd back Mary Colwell's current campaign for a GCSE in natural history, for example. But I fear that, unless more people have meaningful outdoor jobs that involve the natural world, 'nature-deficit disorder' will continue to spread. Right now, agriculture accounts for 88% of the land in Wales but employs less than 2% of the population. If we want a *wilder* nation, we also need to sustain more economically active rural communities – can we create jobs that give people reason to be amongst the blades of the scythe, and the tongues of the bog?

In Welsh a jay is *sgrech y coed* ('the screech of the wood')



The Welsh name for butterwort is *tafod y gors* ('tongue of the bog')

BUTTERWORT © SIMON MILLS, CHIFFCHAFF © JANET PACKHAM

■ *Llên Natur* (llennatur.cymru), run by Cymdeithas Edward Llwyd, is an important reference point for Welsh wildlife terminology. Their *Bywiadur* holds the standardised terms (as well as some folk-names) for all native vertebrates, and many plants and fungi.

■ Some Welsh names have slipped into English: 'gull' comes from the Welsh *gwylan* (like the French *goelan* from the Breton), and 'wrasse' comes from *gwrach* – a hag, or witch ...

■ A GCSE in natural history could bring young people closer to nature. Discover more about the campaign to make this a reality at wildlifetrusts.org/nature-gcse



■ In Welsh, a chiffchaff is a *siff-saff* – in German, it's a *zilp-zalp!*

Did you know?