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*A Murmuration
of Starlings*

**THE COLLECTIVE NOUNS OF
ANIMALS AND BIRDS**

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charm of finches

The term *charm* is a particularly interesting one. Appearing first in the Egerton manuscript of the mid-fifteenth century as *chyrme*, and subsequently in *The Book of St Albans* as *cherme*, it is a variant of the Old English word *cirm*. It has many modern variations: the current dictionary definition of *chirm*, for example, is to chirp or chirrup like birds. Another definition is a group of goldfinches: certainly the term *charm* is commonly believed to refer to the *noise* produced by finches.

Whilst many collective nouns have fallen into almost total disuse, reference is still occasionally made to a *charm* of finches. Whilst one school of thought applies it exclusively to the illustrated goldfinch, another allows for its use for finches in general. (A *trimming* and a *trembling* are other collective nouns for goldfinches.)

Certainly it is appropriate to have a collective noun for finches. Finches generally, as well as goldfinches specifically, are highly gregarious. They often group together in large flocks, particularly outside the breeding season. The greater the food source, the larger the flock. They are often very vocal when in such groups, thus explaining the collective noun. Although many finches will form flocks of mixed finch species, the goldfinch usually associates only with others of its kind.

Finches are primarily seed-eating birds and the goldfinch is no exception, preferring the seeds of herbs and flowering plants to those of grasses. The goldfinch also prefers to eat half-ripe or *milky* seed to dried seed. It is common across most of the British Isles, but scarcer in the far north.

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ack of stoats

Kenneth Graham's classic children's novel *Wind In The Willows* reinforced the image of stoats and weasels as the arch-villains of the countryside: '*.. a company of skirmishing stoats who stuck at nothing occupied the conservatory*'. Stoats, weasels and ferrets had occupied Toad Hall and the public, it seems, has never forgiven them.

The collective noun itself conjures up images of bullying gangs, but the often-reported marauding **packs** of stoats are much more likely simply to have been family groups – there can be up to twelve young in a litter. Their lithe, almost snake-like bodies enable them to follow their prey down holes and burrows, and their sharp teeth and dark eyes complete the picture.

The folklore myth of them sucking blood in vampire-fashion springs from their occasional killing method. Usually they kill with a bite to the back of the neck, but sometimes they will bite the throat of a rabbit and its death is not always instantaneous. Letting go would allow the rabbit to kick out, so injuring the stoat. It holds on, often getting blood on its face and coat in the process. The impressionable observer insists they have seen the stoat sucking the blood of another wild creature!

The stoat's black tail-tip distinguishes it from the weasel. To tell the two apart, it is no use relying on the old joke – 'stoats are stoatally different while weasels are weasily distinguished'! The term **pack** is also applied to weasels, wolves, dogs and a predator of freshwater – the perch.