

“A GLORIOUS BOOK” – JANE GOODALL

# NAMING NATURE



A Cabinet of Natural  
Curiosities for Word Lovers

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Curiosities for Word Lovers

*A Gallery of Selections*

T. A. BARRON

Resplendent Quetzal

Sarcastic Fringehead

Unicorn of the Sea

Morpho Butterfly

Elephant

Platypus

Foxglove

Praying Mantis

Moon Jelly

Emerald Tree Boa

Kiss Me Over the Garden Gate

Halcyon Bird

Vampire Squid



PHAROMACHRUS MOCINNO

# Resplendent Quetzal

A flash of bright, iridescent colors in the rainforest of Central America could be one of the world's most glorious birds: a resplendent quetzal. Brilliant turquoise, green, and scarlet feathers decorate these birds' long, opulent tails. Like jewels glistening among the trees, they shimmer and glow, seeming to radiate their own light. Which is why they truly deserve to be called "resplendent," a word that comes from the Latin *resplendens*, meaning "shining" and "splendid."

The name "quetzal" originated with the Aztec language Nahuatl, whose word *quetzalli* means "precious feathers." (Nahuatl, by the way, is still spoken today by around 2 million people in Mexico.) And "precious" is an appropriate description, for the highly prized feathers of these birds have long symbolized wisdom and power. Additionally, quetzals evoke a strong connection to the Mesoamerican god Quetzalcoatl—a powerful creator god resembling a feathered serpent. In traditional Mesoamerican lore, Quetzalcoatl was credited with many marvels, including the invention of the calendar, the development of farming, and even the creation of humanity.

The first time I ever saw a resplendent quetzal, on a journey through Costa Rica, I wasn't expecting to see anything so spectacular. I was simply appreciating the many shades of green in the thick canopy of leaves over my head. Focusing my binoculars on a particular branch that arched upward, like a leafy arm reaching toward the sky, I followed its graceful curve higher. All of a sudden—a vivid flash of turquoise exploded in my vision. A resplendent quetzal!

For a long while, I stood there, watching the bird's feathers glow with ethereal intensity. Completely oblivious to my presence, it continued to move along the branch, pausing every now and

then to open a gleaming wing or shake itself with a bright burst of colors. Eventually, it moved high enough that the leaves obscured it completely. For me, watching it vanish, it felt like seeing the blazing sun set at the end of the day.

Sadly, the future for these birds does not look as bright as their feathers. Their numbers are declining due to human activities, especially deforestation, which continue to shrink their habitat. For now, at least, these radiant birds remain part of our world—and a miraculously beautiful part, as well.





NEOCLINUS BLANCHARDI

# Sarcastic Fringehead

No kidding—that’s the real English name of this fish.

Found in the saltwater shallows of North America’s Pacific coast, sarcastic fringeheads have distended jaws that can expand enormously. Those huge mouths are filled with dangerously sharp teeth, which the fish use aggressively to attack any foes. If an intruder comes too close to a sarcastic fringehead’s home, there’s no defender more vicious, no fighter more ferocious.

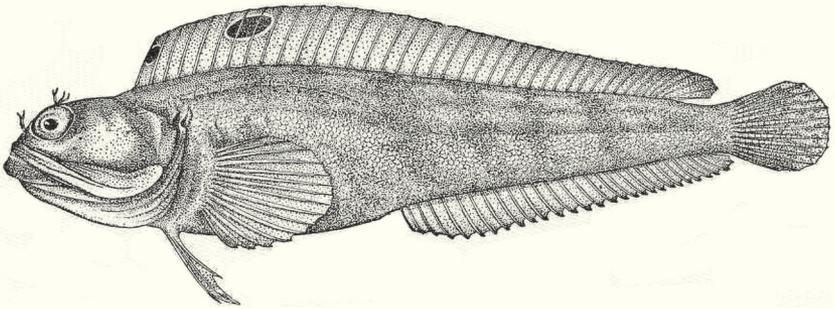
What could possibly have inspired such a bizarre name for this creature? Well, the word “fringehead” isn’t difficult to explain, because it describes the loose, droopy growth on the fish’s head. Honestly, it looks like a really bad haircut.

But what about “sarcastic”? At first glance, that word seems to make no sense at all. Does this fish make tart, snarky comments to mock its fellow reef dwellers? Would it host a caustic, late-night talk show on the reef? As fun as that is to imagine—no.

The explanation lies in the word’s intriguing etymology. Before the word “sarcastic” took on its modern-day meaning, referring to sarcasm as a form of humor, it had a more physical meaning. It originally derived from *sarkázein*, a Greek verb meaning “to rip apart flesh.” Thus, it could be used to describe a brutal attack against an enemy. Which is, of course, something that these highly volatile, battle-ready fish do with great gusto.

Yet that’s not the end of the story. Word enthusiasts will note that there’s still a close connection between the original Greek term and its modern descendant. While the early form describes a vicious attack at the physical level, tearing apart a person’s body, the modern form describes an equally vicious attack at the psychological level, tearing apart a person’s reputation,

intelligence, or ability. In one case, sharp teeth will cut deeply into someone's flesh; in the other case, sharp humor will cut deeply into someone's feelings.



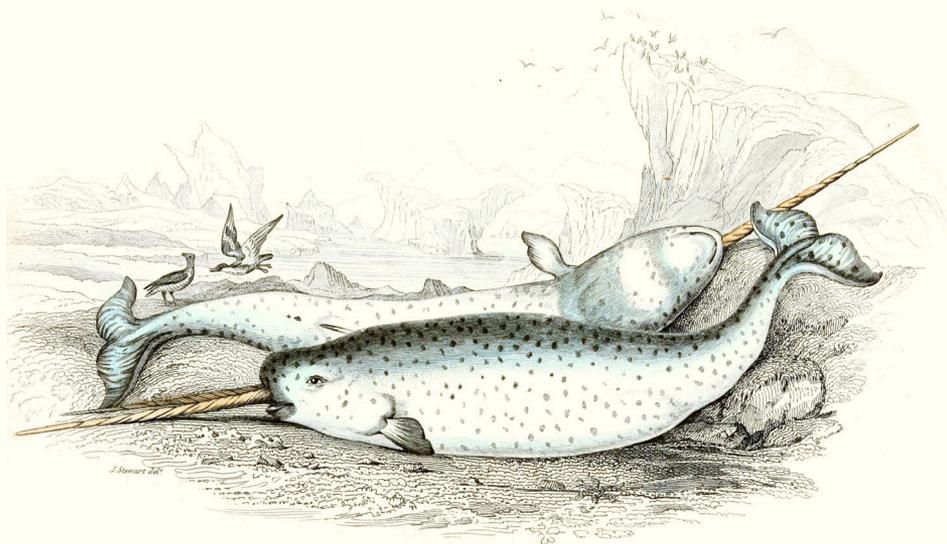
1907 | David Starr Jordan | *Neoclinus blanchardi*

MONODON MONOCEROS

# Unicorn of the Sea

So rare they're almost never seen, narwhals swim through the icy waters of the Arctic. Because of their elegant tusks, which can grow into a lance up to 10 feet (3 meters) long, they've been dubbed “unicorns of the sea.”

Actually, they're cetaceans, kin to other whales, porpoises, and dolphins. Like their cousins the beluga whales, orca whales, and minke whales, narwhals normally live for fifty to sixty years, although some have been known to live up to twice that long. They rarely migrate, preferring to stay in the Arctic waters of Norway, Greenland, and Canada. Their truly distinctive feature is that impressive spiraling tusk, which is, in fact, a supersensitive tooth. Appropriately, the scientific name of these mammals focuses on that feature, calling them *Monodon monoceros*—Latin for “one tooth, one horn.”

1843 | Georges Cuvier | *Monodon monoceros*

Indigenous peoples of the Arctic region have several names for these creatures—including the Inuktitut term *qilalugaaq qernertaq*, which translates roughly to “the seal is swimming.” Other regional names are *tuugaalik* and *qilalugaaq*. One Inuit myth vividly describes the origins of the narwhal. According to the myth, the first narwhal was a woman who twisted her hair into the shape of a long, pointed tusk. Then she was tied securely to a white whale that swam away and dragged her under the surface of the sea, where she drowned—only to return magically as a narwhal.

For ancient Viking sailors, the most striking quality of narwhals wasn’t the tusk but rather the mottled gray and white skin, which they thought was similar to the skin of a drowned sailor. Because most of the narwhals seen by the Vikings were that color, they named these animals *nar hval*, combining the Old Norse words for “corpse” and “whale.” (In fact, only young adults are that mottled gray color. While narwhals start out life as bluish gray, they turn lighter over time, ultimately becoming almost completely white.)

A thousand years ago, when Vikings first brought the tusks of narwhals into European markets, the elegant beauty of those tusks sparked a great deal of attention. People started to wonder what wondrous creatures could have grown them—and, indeed, whether those creatures could possess their own special magic. That’s when things got really interesting.

At that time, popular legends told of a fantastical one-horned beast from India that combined the features of many different animals. Those legends were quite famous and had been around for a long time, having begun in South Asia and China at least three thousand years before the time of Christ. (Most likely, the legends originated from someone who had, long ago, sighted a rhinoceros or a wild ox.) The Romans eventually dubbed that legendary beast *unicornus*. With the beautiful narwhal tusks

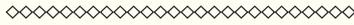
suddenly appearing in Europe, it didn't take long for bards and traders to amend the old legends and paint the modern image of a unicorn. Soon, that mythical being was widely celebrated as an elegant, graceful steed with a perfectly virtuous spirit—and a single, gleaming horn.

All this is proof that truth really is stranger than fiction. In the wondrously unpredictable ways that language and nature can twine together over time, the tusk of a cetacean from the Arctic Ocean somehow merged with the story of a bizarre beast inspired by a rhinoceros from India—resulting in the enduring image of one of humanity's most cherished mythical creatures. The magical powers attributed to unicorns are no more surprising than this true story of how they came to be described as we know them today.

How fitting that we have given narwhals, those Arctic creatures whose tusks have inspired so many magical stories and works of art, a new and beautiful name. For they surely deserve to be called “unicorns of the sea.”



c. 1840 | Georges Cuvier | *Morpho beelenor*



MORPHO HELENOR

# Morpho Butterfly

Exquisitely beautiful, the radiant wings of morpho butterflies grace rainforests across South America, Central America, and the Caribbean. There are twenty-nine species in total, all of them gorgeous, with around half of them found in the Ecuadorian Amazon.

The bright, metallic colors of morphos' wings aren't from pigments but rather from intricate microscopic scales that magnify and reflect certain wavelengths, creating luminous colors. Whenever sunlight touches those wings, they light up brilliantly. As a result, these butterflies can be seen from great distances—up to two-thirds of a mile (1 kilometer) away. When viewed from different angles, the colors of the wings shift dramatically, moving from blue to green, lavender, and purple.

Morpho is an Ancient Greek word with two meanings. It can describe something beautiful and appealing as well as something varied and changeable. The word is often associated with Aphrodite, the goddess of beauty, love, and sexual desire. (There was even a cult, based in Corinth, devoted to a version of the goddess called Aphrodite Morpho.) The first person to use the name “morpho butterfly,” Johan Christian Fabricius, a Danish scientist in the eighteenth century, probably drew from both meanings, for he chose a term that celebrates the radiant beauty of these creatures as well as the changeable colors of their wings.

Habitat destruction and the fragmentation of tropical forests are the greatest threats to morphos today. Throughout their range, they are increasingly endangered by the loss of intact forest ecosystems. Yet despite these challenges, they continue, at least for now, to brighten our world.

Wonderful words for “butterfly” float to our ears from many languages around the world. In French, the name is *papillon*, which evolved from ancient Indo-European words meaning “to tremble or shake” (as the wings of butterflies do so delicately). Meanwhile, in German, the name *schmetterling* originated with the Slavic word for cream—so in a lovely confluence of languages, German speakers make a connection with cream, while English speakers make a connection with butter. *Mariposa*, the Spanish name, probably stems from the Virgin Mary, and the spiritual idea that butterflies are the embodiments of human souls. By contrast, the Russian name, *babochka*, carries a darker meaning, linked to frightful dangers. It evolved from *baba*, the term in folklore for an old woman who just might actually be a witch.

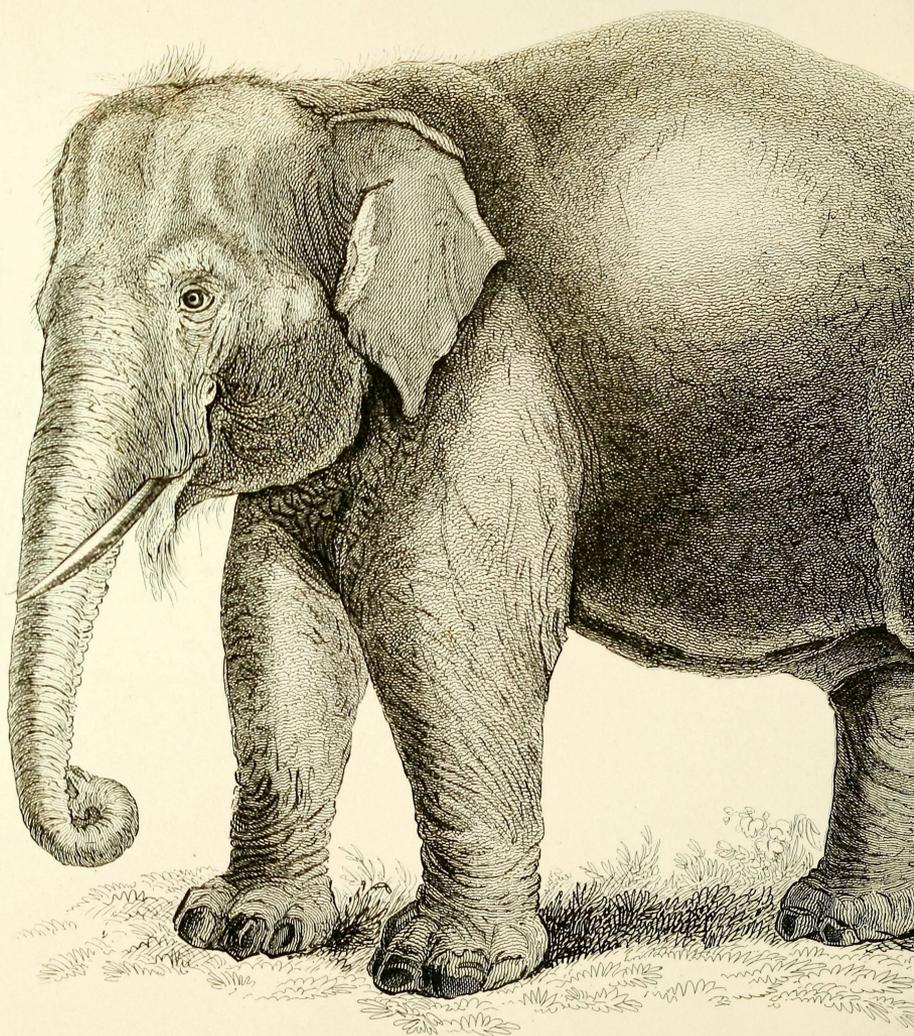
That’s only the beginning of the marvelous names for these equally marvelous creatures. In Italian, butterflies are called *farfalla*; in Balinese, *kupu-kupu*; and in Norwegian, *sommerfugl*. Portuguese speakers say *borboleta*; people in the Philippines favor *paruparo*; while many Chinese say *húdié* (蝴蝶). Hawai‘ians, whose native language is ever musical, say *pulelehua*. Swahili people use the word *kipepeo*. And in India, speakers of Hindi say *titlī* (तितली). In Welsh, butterflies are known as *pilipala*; in Dutch, *vlinder*; in Japanese, *chō* (蝶); and in Finnish, *perhonen*. And pretty much everywhere, they are called “beautiful.”

While we’re talking about these creatures . . . there’s one more figure from Greek myth who deserves to be mentioned—Psyche, the goddess of the human soul. (Her name, of course, is the root for words such as “psychology” and “psychic.”) Her story, one of the most poignant tales ever told, describes how she endured terrible loss and hardship before, at last, reuniting with her lover and ultimately gaining immortality. It’s a story of immense suffering, devotion, and, finally, renewal. That’s why Psyche is revered as an example of the enduring strength

of love, the soul's connection with the divine, and the power of transformation.

And what is Psyche's symbol? A butterfly.





## ELEPHANTIDAE

## Elephant

No land animals on Earth are bigger than elephants. Like their extinct relatives, the well-named “mammoths,” they are truly immense. Found in Africa and Asia, they regularly walk great distances over grassy plains and forests—which is why the collective term for them is “a parade of elephants.” And wherever they go, they leave tracks across many vital and varied landscapes.

Likewise, the names for these majestic creatures have left tracks across many vital and varied languages. The paths on that linguistic terrain are complex and mysterious, touching languages as diverse as Ancient Greek (ἐλέφας, or *elephas*), Old Norse (*úlfaldi*), Hebrew (*eleph*), Old French (*oliphant*), and Latin (*elephantus*), as well as other possible languages, including Phoenician, Egyptian, Germanic, Slavonic, and Sanskrit.

My favorite names for elephants come from African languages. Inspired by the enormous size of these creatures, which are big enough to topple and crush trees, the names in Zulu, Tsonga, and Tswana all focus on immensity. And they all mean, essentially, “impossible to stop.” The Zulu name for elephants, *indlovu*, is also related to the term for “crashing through.” (These are, as you can tell, rather weighty word origins.)

The most revealing—and most disturbing—aspect of European names for elephants is that, for many centuries, the word simply meant “ivory.” Around 700 BCE, when Homer and Hesiod wrote about *elephas*, they were describing just the commodity of tusks. So the name applied only to that commodity, something people could buy or sell in the marketplace—not to the magnificent animal that actually produced those tusks. It took a long time (at least two thousand years) before people started using the word “elephant” to describe the entire living creature.

Such longstanding habits are hard to break. Even today, alas, hunters call elephants simply “tuskers.” This reduction of animal to commodity eliminates any consideration of the elephants themselves. It denies their existence as creatures with amazing abilities, as our companions on this planet, and as sources of inspiration to people everywhere. What a loss that is, to effectively erase from human awareness a creature that’s so impressive and compelling!

Consider this: Elephants are so intelligent they can vocalize specific names for their companions, recognize themselves in the mirror, and even paint pictures by holding the paintbrush with their trunks. So capable they have more than forty thousand muscles in their fabulously flexible trunks (compared to less than seven hundred muscles in an entire human body). And so sensitive they show real grief whenever they lose family members, visiting the bones of their lost ones and stroking them gently.

It’s easy to understand why elephants are cherished symbols of wisdom and intelligence in many cultures around the world. They figure prominently in religions and mythologies, ranging from the Kamba people in Kenya to Hindus in India to Buddhists in Thailand. And they are beloved by people young and old on every continent.

Even so, elephants are now in danger of extinction. The two main causes are the continued slaughter by poachers who crave their tusks, and the ongoing destruction of elephants’ natural habitat. Currently, both species of African elephant are critically endangered.

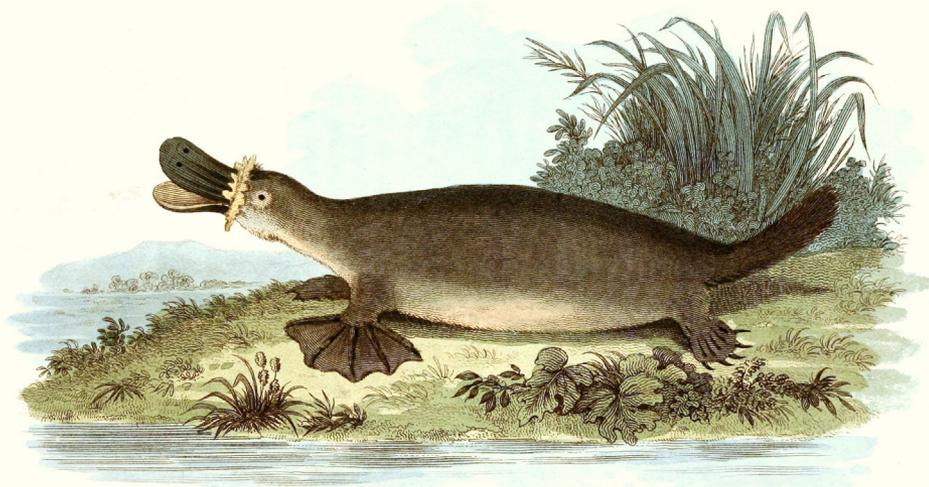
Will we humans do whatever it takes to protect these wondrous, intelligent, beautiful creatures? It’s up to us to decide. The consequences of our choices will be, in every sense, enormous.

ORNITHORHYNCHUS ANATINUS

# Platypus

Seriously, what could be more bizarre than a platypus? This unique creature, swimming in the waters of Australia, has the bill of a duck, the feet of an otter, the tail of a beaver, and the venom of a scorpion. In addition, unlike almost any other mammal, it lays eggs like a bird.

When eighteenth-century European scientists first studied a preserved sample of a platypus, they were quite confused. One of them, German biologist Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, proposed giving this odd creature the species name *paradoxus*—the Latin word for “puzzling.” Other people, more skeptical, thought the whole thing was just a hoax. They argued, how could such a bizarre animal even exist? They concluded that the sample must have been stitched together from several different animals.



Aboriginal peoples, who were the first to encounter the platypus, were themselves struck by its oddities. In one Aboriginal tale, the platypus appeared when a male water rat (who was both charming and persuasive) got together with a female duck (who was both adventurous and freethinking). They had children who shared the physical qualities of both, with thick fur as well as webbed feet.

The Aboriginal peoples gave this creature many distinctive names. Depending on the Australian region, it's called *mallingong*, *biladurang*, *tambreet*, *oornie*, *watjarang*, *dyiimalung*, and *boondaburra*. (My personal favorite is that last one, *boondaburra*, which somehow sounds like just the right name for this animal.)

The name platypus is derived from two Greek words, *platys* (“broad or flat”) and *pous* (“foot”). The collective noun for describing a group of them is wonderfully alliterative—“a paddle of platypuses.” The most adorable name associated with this paradoxical creature is the one for its offspring. A baby platypus is called a “puggle.”

The scientific name, like the animal itself, is unique as well as confusing: *Ornithorhynchus anatinus*, two terms meaning “birdlike snout” and “ducklike.” Meanwhile, scientists classify the platypus in the order *Monotremata*, the only kind of mammals that produce their young by laying eggs. It's also the world's oldest order of living mammals.

There we have it—a rare creature whose stories about its name are as weird, puzzling, and surprising as the animal itself. Which is very weird, puzzling, and surprising, indeed! A platypus, after all, combines many qualities that would seem so contradictory as to be impossible in any other animal. It is a creature that is duck-billed, fur-backed, beaver-tailed, and flat-footed—and also, let's not forget, able to lay eggs and wield a poisonous stinger.

By the way, if you're ever talking about these quirky creatures at a cocktail party, the plural of platypus isn't "platypuses" (despite what some dictionaries may say). So is the right word "platypi"? Nope. Since the name came originally from Greek, the plural is actually "platypodes." (It's pronounced *pla-TIH-puh-deez*, which rhymes with the name of the Greek playwright Euripides.)

Too tricky to remember? Don't worry. It's highly unlikely that anyone will ever correct you if you just decide to call them "platypuses."





DIGITALIS PURPUREA

# Foxglove

The flower we call “foxglove” is strikingly beautiful, but that beauty isn’t limited to just its appearance. With one of the most evocative names in nature, it invites us to imagine a fox adorning its paws with elegant, luxurious gloves. That very image has inspired many paintings, poems, and songs, and has persisted for centuries. In fact, the ancient Anglo Saxon term for the flower was *foxes glofa*, which is often translated as “glove of a fox.”

However, some linguists who have studied *foxes glofa* suggest that the word “foxes” actually had a different original meaning—“fairies” or “the good folk.” Maybe the flowers weren’t originally seen as gloves for foxes but rather as bonnets or gloves for the elusive Little People themselves.

Supporting this notion, the flower’s Gaelic name, *lus nam ban-sith*, links the foxglove to “the fairy woman.” Some people believe that the petals, when closely examined, show the fingerprints of these magical beings. Even today, some English people claim it’s terribly bad luck to pick a foxglove. Why? Because that would incur the unending wrath of the fairy folk.

The roles of this plant in ancient lore don’t end there, sprouting up like so many flowers in the fields. Celtic tales list foxglove as an essential ingredient in the potion that enables witches to fly, and tell of vengeful foxes wearing the flowers whenever they attacked village folk. Still others speak of the flower as a harmful source of poison (which is in fact true). Some of its nicknames, such as “dead man’s bells,” testify to the potency of its toxins.

In one of nature’s many surprising twists, those very same toxins are also a powerful source of healing. Herbalists discovered long ago that extracts from foxglove leaves could

help to treat some heart ailments, such as poor circulation. During the First World War, British people collected foxgloves to be used as medicine for ailing soldiers. In more recent times, foxglove became the original source of the pharmaceutical drug digitalis, an important treatment for heart disease.

Whether it is helping witches fly, filling apothecary shelves, crowning the heads of fairies, curing heart problems, or adorning well-dressed foxes—the possibilities, whether real or imagined, are endless. You could say, for this flower, striking beauty and unlimited possibilities go hand in glove.





## MANTODEA

# Praying Mantis

Not surprisingly, the praying mantis is named for its appearance as someone in a prayerful stance. In fact, “mantis” is derived from the Greek term *mantikos* (μαντικός), which means “like an oracle,” “seer,” or “prophet.”

This insect is also unusual for its triangular head, which can swivel in many directions. In fact, the mantis is capable of turning its head 180 degrees (something no other insect can do). This capability helps it to spot potential prey with its compound eyes, which provide excellent, three-dimensional vision.

Yet it’s the evocative posture of this insect that has made it so famous. For centuries, it’s been admired by diverse cultures around the world. And the extent of that admiration is simply astounding.

In China, the insect’s deliberate, stealthy, and focused movements helped to inspire the founding 1,500 years ago of Shaolin kung fu, considered by many to be the original form of martial arts. Japanese culture has long valued the insect as an unstoppable warrior. And in ancient Egypt, the mantis represented a guide for people in their greatest quests. For generations of Celts, the insect’s posture signified deep devotion and perseverance in the face of hardship. Meanwhile, Native Americans have long revered the insect as a symbol of the Great Spirit and the enduring continuity of life.

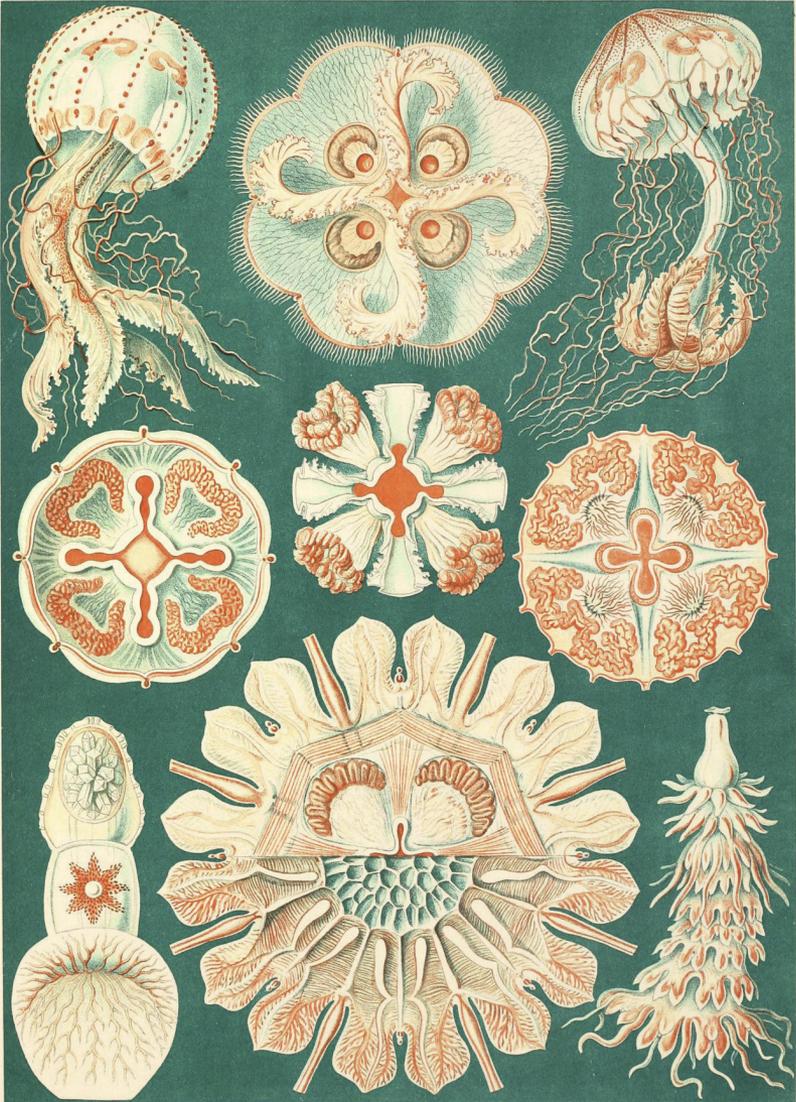
Names for the praying mantis in many languages convey that same sense of reverence. The Russian name, *bogomolka* (Богомолка), translates as “she who prays to God,” while the German name, *Gottesanbeterin*, means “God worshipper.” That’s very similar to the Portuguese, *louva-a-deus*, “God praiser.” The name in Afrikaans, *bidsprinkhaan*, has a similar meaning—the word *bid* means “to pray,” while *sprinkhaan*

means “grasshopper.” In the same vein, the French call this insect *mante religieuse*, meaning “religious mantis,” while speakers of Persian say *âxundak*, which translates as “little cleric” (آخوندک).

These religious associations sometimes take a different twist, imagining the mantis as a miniature steed. For example, the name in modern Greek, *aloyaki tis Panagias* (αλογάκι της Παναγίας), means “the little horse of the Mother of Jesus.” In the West Indies, people also call this insect “God horse,” while the Turkish name, *peygamberdevesi*, means “the prophet’s camel.”

Among all these delightful names for the praying mantis, my favorite is the one from Hungary. To the Hungarians, it’s called *ájtatos manó*. Which means, literally, “pious pixie.” Appropriately, the scientific name for this celebrated creature is *Mantis religiosa*, which is Latin for “religious mantis.” That name, as we know, reflects an entire world of devotion.





AURELIA AURITA

# Moon Jelly

Jellyfish fascinated Pliny the Elder, the Roman naturalist who wrote about nature with great erudition and enthusiasm. To him, jellyfish ranked among the world's strangest—and most splendid—creatures. He was particularly intrigued by how they moved through their watery environment by expansion and contraction, a pattern that reminded him very much of breathing. In fact, that unique quality inspired the name he gave to them: *Pulmo marina*, which means “lungs of the sea.”

Four hundred years earlier, Aristotle had felt the same fascination. But what caught his attention wasn't how jellyfish moved through water, or the typical bell shape of their bodies, but how they could use their tentacles to sting. In light of that ability, he labeled them *cnidae*, the Greek term for “stinging.” That's why, all these centuries later, the scientific phylum that includes jellyfish is known as *Cnidaria*.

Jellyfish have been thriving on this planet for hundreds of millions of years. Some grow very large—the lion's mane jellyfish has tentacles that can reach over 100 feet (35 meters) in length. They come in a wide array of colors, including blue, pink, and yellow, while some of them can produce their own light through the chemical process of bioluminescence.

The collective names for jellyfish are similarly unusual and intriguing. Most commonly, a group of them is called a “smack,” possibly a reference to the painful stings those jellyfish could impart to anyone venturing too close. Some people, however, choose instead to call them a “smuck.” Who knows why? I've never heard a good explanation, though it's conceivable the term might refer to the sound of stepping on the body of a beached jellyfish. In addition, there are others who prefer to call a group of jellies a “swarm” or a “bloom.”

For most of us, though, jellyfish are notable simply because their appearance resembles . . . well, jelly. In fact, most of them are composed of 95 percent water, with the rest being a jellylike material called mesoglea.

My favorite variety, moon jellies, are round, translucent, and alluringly mysterious. They really do resemble delicate, silvery moons. Curiously, in some cultures, they are thought to resemble not moons but ears—hence their names in German (*ohrenqualle*), Russian (*aureliya usbastaya*), and Dutch (*oorkwal*). In any case, these creatures float through the world's oceans, as insubstantial as moonlight on water, glowing with their lovely lunar sheen.

Myths in many languages have been inspired by jellyfish. One of the best is a compelling tale from ancient Japan about a handsome, powerful creature who called himself Kurage. Elegant and majestic, he chose that name because it evoked the words for “ocean” and “moon.” But pride ultimately poisoned his mind. In a fit of arrogance, Kurage decided to travel all around the world by himself. Terrible calamities struck on the voyage, battering his body and shattering his mind. He suffered so greatly that he ultimately shrank down until his bones completely disappeared. Returning home, a mere wisp of his former self, he became what we now call a jellyfish, destined to drift aimlessly through the sea for all eternity.



CORALLUS CANINUS

# Emerald Tree Boa

As vibrant green as the Amazon rainforest where it lives, the emerald tree boa is one of the world's most beautiful snakes. Like all boa constrictors, it's not venomous—but if you happen to be a bird or small mammal within reach, it will detect your body heat, wrap its powerful body around you, and quickly squeeze you to death.

That's not all the remarkable qualities of these snakes. A female tree boa gives birth to live young that have hatched from eggs inside herself (an unusual ability that makes her “ovoviparous,” one of the most fun scientific terms ever to say out loud). The biggest of these boa constrictors grow as long as 9 feet (2.7 meters) and blend perfectly into the tropical foliage.

The name *boa* comes from the Latin *boa*, meaning “large serpent.” Although no one knows the exact origins of the Latin term, it might have come from the Albanian word *bālwā*, which referred to some kinds of snakes. The first recorded use of the term *boa* was almost two thousand years ago in Pliny the Elder's *Naturalis Historia*. (Alas, his final revisions of that masterwork were interrupted by the deadly eruption of Mount Vesuvius . . . so his time for writing was, you might say, severely constricted.)



PERSICARIA ORIENTALIS

# Kiss-Me-Over- the-Garden-Gate

With such a romantic name, you'd expect this plant to be lush and beautiful. And so it is. Growing tall and elegant, with deep pink bunches of flowers, it has dangled gracefully over garden gates in many lands, from Australia to Europe to North America.

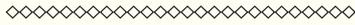
While traveling in the region of the Black Sea over three centuries ago, the French botanist Joseph Pitton de Tournefort spotted these flowers near Tbilisi, Georgia, and on Mount Ararat in eastern Turkey. With the help of a Capuchin friar, he obtained the seeds. A full-blown romance with this lovely plant soon swept across Europe.

Although it was highly prized by gardeners in the Victorian era, the alluringly named kiss-me-over-the-garden-gate fell gradually out of favor a century ago, being viewed as somewhat old-fashioned. But it has regained popularity in recent years, especially among people who grow the most cherished heirloom varieties. So the plant is again adorning the garden gates of folks who appreciate its rosy blossoms—and, of course, the romantic kisses those blossoms might inspire.

Like other flowers that have ebbed and flowed in popularity over time, this one has several different names. It's also called "ladyfinger," "prince's feather," "Oriental persicary," and even "ragged sailor." To my mind, though, none of those has nearly as much whimsy and charm as kiss-me-over-the-garden-gate.

Worth noting is the botanical fact that the seeds of this plant need to experience the cold, harsh temperatures of winter before they can germinate in the warm, welcoming days of spring. So they must suffer and struggle before they can ultimately thrive and bloom. Hmmmm . . . might that also be a metaphor for a good romance?





ALCEDINIDAE

# Halcyon Bird

This poetic English name for a variety of kingfishers is quite different from the purely descriptive names in French and German. The French name *martin-pêcheur* conveys that these birds are good at catching fish, while the German name *eisvogel*, which translates as “ice bird,” refers to their striking blue plumage.

The English name “halcyon bird,” by contrast, isn’t meant to be descriptive. It hails from a poignant Greek myth, a beautiful story of grievous tragedy and enduring love. The tale revolves around Alcyone, a princess of Thessaly and the daughter of the god of the winds, Aeolus. (Incidentally, Aeolus’ name is the root of the term “aeolian harp,” a beautiful musical instrument whose strings vibrate with the wind.) Although there are several different versions of the story, they all agree on one point: Alcyone and her husband, Ceyx, were deeply in love and lived together blissfully—until, unexpectedly, Ceyx perished in a storm at sea. Utterly devastated, Alcyone couldn’t be consoled. So intense was her grief that at last, she hurled herself into the ocean to drown.

Moved by this tragedy, the gods transformed them both into sea birds—kingfishers, called *halkyōn* in Greek or *halcyon* in Latin. Additionally, to allow Alcyone to build a nest that could rest safely on top of the waves, her father promised to calm the ocean winds every year at the time of the winter solstice. For several weeks around that time, the ocean winds subside so that Alcyone can make her nest upon the surface. Ever since, those sublime days of peace and tranquility at sea are called “halcyon days.” Today, the phrase refers to any time of peace, joy, and prosperity.



# Vampire Squid

“Vampire squid from hell.” That’s the precise translation of this animal’s scientific name, *Vampyroteuthis infernalis*. Not many creatures carry a name that is so loaded down with negative baggage. We all understand the meaning of “vampire,” long used to describe a terrifying being of the shadows who just can’t resist drinking the blood of humans. The English word grew out of the Hungarian term *vampir*, which itself evolved from the Slavonic term *qpyri*. And of course, the word “hell” isn’t exactly the name of a lovely place to visit (although you could say it’s a destination of sorts). That word is derived from the Old Norse word *hel*, meaning “place of the dead,” which evolved to the Old German *hellia*, and ultimately, to the English word we use today.

First described in 1903 by German marine biologist Carl Chun, the vampire squid isn’t, in fact, a squid. Nor is it an octopus, though it shares some similarities. It’s the lone surviving member of the taxonomic order of a distant relative of the octopus, a “living fossil” cephalopod whose ancestry stretches back more than 100 million years.

What inspired such a thoroughly demonic name? For starters, this creature lives in the deepest, darkest realms of the ocean. Not only does it have the scary, cloaked appearance of all squid, its overall color is dark, bloody red. And its eyes are so swollen they’re the biggest in proportion to the body of any animal on the planet. Oh, and let’s not forget to mention its eerie bioluminescence, which can cast wavering light even in the most shadowy depths. In addition, it can spray globs of glowing mucus that can stick to the body of any attacker.

Beyond question, all these characteristics are helpful to the vampire squid’s survival in the remote undersea zones where it lives. And equally beyond question, they amount to one terrifying, demonic creature—one that is scary as hell.