

It's all in the tail

Tails are probably not the first things that spring to mind when thinking about animal sounds. Beautiful songs or spine-chilling cries, sure, but tails? It's unlikely.

Several animal groups use their tails to generate sound. One of the most famous of these are rattlesnakes, a group of venomous reptiles found across North and South America. As their name suggests, rattlesnakes possess a rattle at the end of their tail. Its function is to warn potential predators to keep their distance or face the prospect of a deadly bite. The rattle is made up of small pieces of keratin that bang together when the tail is rapidly vibrated. Rattlesnakes aren't the only reptiles to use a bit of tail-shaking when confronted by danger. Many other types of snake use the same, albeit much quieter, method to send a warning to other animals on the lookout for a quick dinner. Why evolution graced rattlesnakes with a sound-producing tail has been the subject of scientific positing for decades but, whatever the reason, the rapid shake of a rattlesnake's rattle has proven to be a highly effective messenger.

[Rattlesnake tail sounds recorded at London Zoo by Richard Ranft \(BL ref 21461\)](#)



Birds can usually make themselves understood with their voices alone, however some species also bring their tails into the mix. The Indian Peafowl is one such species. For a long time the majesty of the male's tail display was thought to be a purely visual cue to woo nearby females and deter potential rivals. As well as producing a feast for the eyes, a peacock's tail display also creates a distinctive rustling sound which was initially thought to be an inert byproduct of the main spectacle. When researchers at the [University of Manitoba](#) investigated this further however, they discovered that the sound also had infrasonic properties which, though inaudible to humans, can be detected by other birds. But what message does this sound actually convey? It's thought that the infrasonic rustling acts as a sonic reinforcement to the tail display, helping other individuals assess the quality and strength of the performer. Indian Peafowls naturally occur in dense forests across the Indian Subcontinent, so being able to utilise low frequencies, which travel further than high frequency sounds, is particularly useful when individuals can't always be seen. Nobody wants to wade through loads of scrub only to be disappointed, so listening out for these infrasonic clues can save both males and females a whole lot of hassle.

[Peacock tail feather display recorded in England by John Paterson \(BL ref 62061\)](#)



Another bird that uses its tail feathers to communicate is the Common Snipe. Males possess modified outer tail feathers which, when held at right angles

to the body, produce a drumming sound during their dramatic aerial display flights. As snipe are crepuscular, these flamboyant performances normally take place at twilight and sit in stark contrast with the bird's usually shy and retiring demeanour.

In May 1943, RAF Flying Officer R.A. Carr-Lewty published a paper in [British Birds](#) which included this eloquent description of the drumming display:

"When drumming, the Snipe descends with the two outer tail-feathers widely extended, and in this position they are free to vibrate without interference from the other rectrices. Once the requisite speed has been attained, these feathers, by reason of this extension and their peculiar shape and structure, commence to vibrate and continue to do so as long as the speed is maintained; the Snipe attains this speed by diving. In normal flight, the outer tail-feathers, being supported by contact with the other rectrices, have no tendency to vibrate."

[Common Snipe drumming display recorded in Scotland by Richard Margoschis \(BL ref 22497\)](#)

 Common Snipe (courtesy of the Biodiversity Heritage Library)

Moving across to mammals, the North American Beaver uses its flat, paddle-like tail to alert nearby individuals to the presence of danger. When things just don't seem right, beavers will slap their scaly tails on the surface of the water as an alarm signal to other beavers. As these animals are timid and nocturnal, a meaty tail slap may be your only clue that a beaver is nearby.

[North American Beaver tail slap recorded in Ontario by Tom Cosburn \(BL ref 69781\)](#)

 Illustration of a beaver's tail (courtesy of the Biodiversity Heritage Library)

Though songs and calls often dominate our perception of what the natural world sounds like, animals across the world have evolved many other ways to communicate with each other. So the next time you think about wildlife sounds, spare a thought for the tails out there.

[Made-up words and coded sweet-talk](#)

Rosy Hall is an ESRC-funded PhD student from Oxford University working with the BL's Spoken English collections. She writes:

When cataloguing the [Evolving English WordBank](#), we often come across speakers donating words which they have invented themselves. This privileged access to speakers' privately meaningful coinages is not only fun, but also a great reminder of how creative we can be with language when words fail us.

Usually, made-up words come from children's early experiments with speaking; words invented at home – often to name new and unfamiliar objects – which have stuck as humorous and often quite useful family vocab. In the following recording, one visitor to the exhibition describes some of her own family terms:

[C1442 Nonce-Words \(female b.1960\)](#)

Another speaker discusses a personal nonsense word 'amaluvaya,' which she explains is used solely between herself and her partner in order to express affection secretly, meaning 'I'm in love with you.'

[C1442 Amaluvaya \(female b.1953\)](#)

Like a lot of home-grown linguistic innovations, the idea behind 'amaluvaya' is to allow the speaker and hearer to communicate a message in public, but privately. Another example of a coded speech strategy is 'Pig Latin,' a pseudo-language with rules for re-arranging syllables, often used by school-children to conspire without their parents overhearing – or sometimes the other way around!

Occasionally, secret languages are needed for more serious purposes; being able to communicate covertly can of course be a matter of life and death, freedom and persecution. Polari, a form of cant slang used in gay sub-culture at the turn of the century, offered gay men a means of conversing without running the risk of arrest or abuse. A number of our Spoken English collections include fascinating discussions of Polari; you can listen to them [here](#) and [here](#).

You can find out more about Polari at the current [Gay UK exhibition](#), and in Paul Baker's *Fantabulosa: A Dictionary of Polari and Gay Slang* (2002)

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[San Fairy Ann](#)

Rosy Hall is an ESRC-funded PhD student from Oxford University working with the BL's Spoken English collections. She writes:

The phrase 'San Fairy Ann' might sound familiar, perhaps conjuring up memories of Paul McCartney's 1976 [song](#), or Barbara Windsor's 1965 [comedy](#) of the same name. But what does it actually mean, and where does it come from?

The saying has cropped up in our [WordBank](#) collection twice so far, both times the speakers attributing it to an elderly grandparent.

[C1442 San Fairy Ann \(female b.1942\) uncatalogued](#)

'My grandmother always used the phrase when she didn't want to know about something was 'San Fairy Ann' which when I started to learn French at school I discovered was 'ça ne fait rien'. I believe that this was um she probably picked it up from my grandfather when he came back from the First World War.'

[C1442X3968 San Fairy Ann \(female b.1962\)](#)

'In my family we use the phrase 'San Fairy Ann,' which is yelled at people – usually the kids – when they're misbehaving. Um, we think it might come from the French, ça ne fait rien, which we think means – is a phrase of dismissal. My grandmother who's ninety-eight uses it and we've all picked it up from her.'

As the speakers themselves observe here, 'San Fairy Ann' is the result of a common process whereby a saying or word is converted by mis-hearers into something different that seems to make (at least some) sense. There's 'all intensive purposes,' for example, 'electrical votes,' and of course 'damp squid.' Geoffrey Pullum and Mark Liberman call these ['eggcorn'](#) moments, after the mis-interpretation of 'acorn' – and explain that they are not stupid mistakes, but rather 'imaginative attempts at relating something heard to lexical material already known.'

In the case of 'San Fairy Ann', the process has taken place in translation; the phrase is recorded as becoming popular in England after British soldiers came into contact with French during the First World War. 'Ça ne fait rien' – meaning 'never mind' or 'it doesn't matter' – became 'San Fairy Ann,' also commonly 'san ferry Ann' or 'Sally Fairy Ann.' A dictionary of 'Soldier and Sailor Words' from 1925 even has an entry for 'sand for Mary-Ann.' This type of 'soldier slang' is also behind French-influenced phrases like 'mercy buckets' (*merci beaucoup*) and 'bottle of plonk' (*vin blanc*).

Author Jeanette Winterson has also written about the concept, celebrating it as ['a tribute to the exuberance and flexibility of language.'](#) Below she describes the evolution of 'San Fairy Ann' in her own family:

My father was in Ipres, (pronounced Wipers), during the War, and like many of his generation, came back with bits of French. Ce ne fait rien turned into San Fairy Ann, meaning Stuff You, and then a new character emerged in Lancashire-speak, known as Fairy Ann; a got-up creature, no better than she should be, who couldn't give a damn. 'San Fairy Ann to you', morphed into, 'Who does she think she is? Fairy Ann?'

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[Recording of the week: the seabirds of](#)

[Bempton Cliffs](#)

This week's selection comes from Cheryl Tipp, Curator of Wildlife & Environmental Sounds.

If you find yourself in East Yorkshire during the summer holidays, be sure to pay a visit to the stunning seabird colonies at [Bempton Cliffs](#). Every year nearly half a million seabirds congregate on the hard chalk cliff faces in order to breed. Numbers are at their highest between April and August, when Gannets, Kittiwakes, Guillemots, Razorbills, Fulmars, Puffins and gulls jostle for the best positions along the precipitous ledges. This recording, made by Richard Margoschis in 1990, captures all the excitement of this busy community.

You can listen to more wildlife and environmental recordings in the [Environment and Nature](#) section of [British Library Sounds](#).

Follow [@CherylTipp](#) and [@soundarchive](#) for all the latest news.

[A wigwam for a goose's bridle](#)

Rosy Hall is an ESRC-funded PhD student from Oxford University working with the BL's Spoken English collections. She writes:

One of the joys of cataloguing the [Evolving English WordBank](#) is discovering all the weird and wonderful phrases donated to the British Library by speakers from around the world. Researching their origins and meanings inevitably leads the cataloguer down a referencing rabbit-hole – it's all part of the fun!

This week's recording is of a folk phrase given to us by an Australian speaker from New South Wales, about 30 years old

[Wigwams for goose's bridles](#)

There's a phrase that our mother always used in our family...it's wigwams for geese bridles. She would use it whenever we asked her what something was and she didn't want to tell us, like if she'd just bought Christmas presents or birthday presents and we were bringing them home. So we'd say, Mum what's in the bag and her answer would always be 'wigwams for geese bridles'. Which was a nonsense saying, I have no idea where it came from. It could be completely peculiar to our family for all I know!

As the speaker describes, this enigmatic phrase is a handy way of responding to nagging questions from children. A little bit of digging, however, reveals

that the phrase is not a new invention, but in fact it has quite a long history of its own, and a number of different iterations. It is commonly reported as a popular saying in Australia, but is also known in Lincolnshire and other parts of the UK, particularly among older speakers.

Originally the phrase seems to have referred not to 'wigwams' but to a 'wim-wam' or 'whim-wham' – an old word for 'trinket' or 'trifle' first occurring in 17th Century texts. Whether *wims* or *wigs*, it's all the same; reduplication with vowel variation is a common strategy in nonsense-speak – just think of *jibber-jabber*, *fuddy-duddy*, and *hocus-pocus*. A slang dictionary in 1860 lists 'wim-wam' as being 'synonymous with fiddle-faddle, riff-raff, etc, denoting nonsense, rubbish, etc.' Michael Quinion, researching the phrase, even came across the alternative [swinkle-swankle for a goose's nightcap](#)! Anything goes – as long as you fox the kids into silence!

Interestingly enough, a version of the phrase cropped up in another of our collections – BBC Voices. In an interview with speakers from [Osgodby, Lincolnshire](#), one speaker explains that *a wimwam for a mustard mill* is 'really a mild way of saying don't be nosy'.

Nosing into other people's phrases – that's what we do best here at Spoken English!

Do you have an interesting word or phrase to share? Tweet it to us @VoicesofEnglish