



Article & Photo by Margie Manthey and published in the Westport Review Mirror, 2019



Sticking Together For Survival - Many kinds of animals, birds and insects congregate in groups of their own species. Whales swim in pods, geese flock up and ants form colonies. Animals often form groups because they share the same food sources, and living together allows them to find a mate without the need to wander far. While the reasons they band together vary, the bottom line is that being a member of a unified group strengthens the individual's chance at survival, and, in turn, helps support the population of the species itself.

One obvious reason animals stick together is reflected in the old adage "there's safety in numbers." For prey animals, there is a real advantage to having many pairs of eyes and ears (and noses) on alert for danger. When one animal detects trouble, it warns the rest of the group through vocalisations, behaviours or scent warnings. A white-tailed deer may snort, stamp its hoof or raise its tail to alert the herd of your presence. With so many animals on the lookout for trouble, other group members can switch their focus and energy to finding food, so one benefit translates seamlessly into another. A large group of animals can also discourage a predator -- or at least make it harder to make a kill. All predators must weigh the risk of injury and expending valuable energy against the chance of scoring a meal. Large herds of prey animals like bison can be intimidating and dangerous, especially when on the defensive. An injured predator may face dire consequences. Adding to the group benefit, a bunch of like-coloured animals blend together, making it difficult for predators to hone in on a single target. If you have ever watched a huge flock of snow geese take off simultaneously, you can relate to the visually confusing effect they create. When group members vary in colours and patterns – like wild horses do – it can be equally difficult for a pursuing predator to identify one target among the distracting chaos.

The collective wisdom of many individuals can help a group to make better decisions, enhancing survival. Past experiences, both positive and negative, influence decision making and, over time, the group may develop increasingly complex knowledge and skills, surpassing the capabilities of one individual. This is evident in orcas (killer whales), where a pod's coordinated hunting techniques are region-specific and are passed down through many generations. Life in a cohesive group allows younger animals to learn survival techniques, as well. Juvenile wolves, for example, may not actively participate in bringing down prey, but they learn from the sidelines as they watch their more experienced pack members.

You probably knew that a group of wolves is called a pack, but how many of these other animal group names do you recognize? While some are fitting, a few are odd or downright silly: a shrewdness of apes; a glaring of cats; a murder of crows; a raft of ducks; a convocation of eagles; a stand of flamingos; a skulk of foxes; a gaggles of geese; a tower of giraffes; a scold of jays; a romp of otters; a prickle of porcupines; an unkindness of ravens; a squabble of seagulls; a scurry of squirrels; a gang of turkeys; a bale of turtles; a wake of vultures; and a zeal of zebras. Recently, "a congress of baboons" has gone viral on the internet, but this is inaccurate -- and some say it insults the baboon, whose actual group name is called a troop!