

## Skein, Gaggle, Wedge

Come autumn, the migratory birds that mate, nest and raise their young in northern latitudes return to warmer climes for the winter. Most conspicuous of these across North America are the geese that annually migrate southward by the millions.

Honking and crying, a large group of geese will arrange themselves in the classic v-formation known as a *wedge*. Visually arresting to human spectators below, the wedge formation helps each bird conserve energy by reducing air friction on the individual behind it.

Sometimes the organized wedge disintegrates when the flock is about to land, or when a small group flies but a short distance. The bird's wing strokes and body postures collectively fall into a confusion of complex twists and angles called a *skein*.

This is the same term used to denominate a length of yarn or thread wound in a loose, long coil. The interweavings of the fiber in a skein of yarn suggested to English speakers the twining and roiling of birds in flight. The *Oxford English Dictionary* has traced the word's association with birds to a British novel dated 1860, where the author writes, "A skein of wild fowl were winging their arrowy flight."

But the noun's association with thread and yarn is of considerable antiquity. *Skein* in this sense has been tracked to a document dated 1440.