24 profoundly beautiful words that describe nature and landscapes

From aquabob to zawn, writer Robert Macfarlane's collection of unusual, achingly poetic words for nature creates a lexicon we all can learn from.

Eight years ago, nature writer extraordinaire Robert Macfarlane discovered that the latest edition of the Oxford Junior Dictionary was missing a few things. Oxford University Press confirmed that indeed, a list of words had been removed; words that the publisher felt were no longer relevant to a modern-day childhood. So goodbye to acorn, adder, ash, and beech. Farewell to bluebell, buttercup, catkin, and conker. Adios cowslip, cygnet, dandelion, fern, hazel, and heather. And no more heron, ivy, kingfisher, lark, mistletoe, nectar, newt, otter, pasture and willow. And in their place came the new kids on the block, words like blog, broadband, bullet-point, celebrity, chatroom, committee, cut-and-paste, MP3 player and voice-mail.

Woe is the world of words.
But inspired by the culling and in combination with a lifetime of collecting terms about place, Macfarlane set out to counter the trend by creating a glossary of his own.

“We lack a Terra Britannica, as it were: a gathering of terms for the land and its weathers,” he recently wrote in a beautiful essay in The Guardian, “– terms used by crofters, fishermen, farmers, sailors, scientists, miners, climbers, soldiers, shepherds, poets, walkers and unrecorded others for whom particularised ways of describing place have been vital to everyday practice and perception.”

And thus his book, Landmarks, was born. A field guide of sorts to the language of nature – an ode to the places afforded to us by Mother Nature – which includes thousands of remarkable words used in England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales to describe land, nature and weather.

The words came from dozens of languages, he explains, dialects, sub-dialects and specialist vocabularies: from Unst to the Lizard, from Pembrokeshire to Norfolk; from Norn and Old English, Anglo-Romani, Cornish, Welsh, Irish, Gaelic, Orcadian, Shetlandic and Doric, and numerous regional versions of English, through to Jérriais, the dialect of Norman still spoken on the island of Jersey.

“I have long been fascinated by the relations of language and landscape – by the power of strong style and single words to shape our senses of place,” he writes. Of the thousands of wonderful words included in the book, here are some that warranted mention in Macfarlane’s essay.

Afèith: A Gaelic word describing a fine vein-like watercourse running through peat, often dry in the summer.

Ammil: A Devon term for the thin film of ice that lacquers all leaves, twigs and grass blades when a freeze follows a partial thaw, and that in sunlight can cause a whole landscape to glitter.

Aquabob: A variant English term for icicle in Kent.

Arête: A sharp-edged mountain ridge, often between two glacier-carved corries.

Caochan: Gaelic for a slender moor-stream obscured by vegetation such that it is virtually hidden from sight.

Clinkerbell: A variant English term for icicle in Hampshire.

Crizzle: Northamptonshire dialect verb for the freezing of water that evokes the sound of a natural activity too slow for human hearing to detect.

Daggler: Another variant English term for icicle in Hampshire.
Eit: In Gaelic, a word that refers to the practice of placing quartz stones in streams so that they sparkle in moonlight and thereby attract salmon in the late summer and autumn.

Feadan: A Gaelic word describing a small stream running from a moorland loch.

Goldfoil: Coined by the poet Gerard Manley Hopkins, describing a sky lit by lightning in “zigzag dints and creasings.”

Honeyfur: A five-year-old girl's creation to describe the soft seeds of grasses pinched between fingertips.

Ickle: A variant English term for icicle in Yorkshire.

Landskein: A term coined by a painter in the Western Isles referring to the braid of blue horizon lines on a hazy day.

Pirr: A Shetlandic word meaning a light breath of wind, such as will make a cat's paw on the water.

Rionnach maoinmeans: A Gaelic word referring to the shadows cast on the moorland by clouds moving across the sky on a bright and windy day.

Shivelight: A word created by poet Gerard Manley Hopkins for the lances of sunshine that pierce the canopy of a wood.

Shuckle: A variant English term for icicle in Cumbria.

Smeuse: An English dialect noun for the gap in the base of a hedge made by the regular passage of a small animal.

Tankle: A variant English term for icicle in Durham.

Teine biorach: A Gaelic term meaning the flame or will-o'-the-wisp that runs on top of heather when the moor burns during the summer.

Ungive: In Northamptonshire and East Anglia, to thaw.

Zawn: A Cornish term for a wave-smashed chasm in a cliff.

Zwer: The onomatopoeic term for the sound made by a covey of partridges taking flight.

"There are experiences of landscape that will always resist articulation, and of which words offer only a distant echo. Nature will not name itself. Granite doesn't self-identify as igneous. Light has no grammar. Language is always late for its subject," Macfarlane says. "But we are and always have been name-callers, christeners."

"Words are grained into our landscapes," he adds, "and landscapes grained into our
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What on earth were they thinking of ??!! , Is it not enough that our children are in danger losing their connection with the natural world--- and now they cannot even look up relevant words in their dictionary. Shoot the compilers.!!

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Thank you for these lovely words, and for sharing them. :)

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