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Angry? Welcome to the Zoo!

For anger issues, Russian turns to the animal world.

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Бешенство: rabies, fury

The Russian language has lots of ways to describe getting angry, losing your temper, and flying off the handle. Сердиться/рассердиться (to get angry) is just so bland. It can't capture the rage you feel when, say, you spend two hours filling in an online application, hit "save" and watch your work disappear into the ether. Я рассердилась (I got really angry) just doesn't cut it.

For fierce fury Russians look to the animal kingdom. In fact, the verb pair звереть/озвереть (to become enraged) literally means "to become animal-like" — зверь is an animal or beast. Sometimes it means to be inhuman: Люди озверели. Они как животные! (People have gone wild. They're like animals!) Sometimes it means to become furious about something: Наш профессор неожиданно озверел ◙ я впервые в жизни видел его в таком состоянии

(Our professor unexpectedly went ballistic — it was the first time in my life I'd ever seen him in such a state).

People might become fierce or savage: свирепеть/рассвирепеть. A wild forest animal might do this — when provoked by a human: Раненый медведь рассвирепел и бросился на охотника (The wounded bear flew into a rage and attacked the hunter). And people do it, too — when provoked by a human: Она даёт ему пощёчину, он в ответ свирепеет (She slapped him across the face, which made him fly off the handle). Sometimes humans do it without any provocation at all: Он свирепел иногда без причи́ны (He sometimes completely lost his temper for no reason at all).

In Russian, as in English, someone who is out of his or her mind is said to be rabid, although in English it generally means fanatical while in Russian it generally means furious. In Russian most commonly someone is "in a rabid state" —в бешенстве: Андрей заорал в бешенстве, выскочил из дому и помчался прочь (Andrei roared ferociously, raced out of the house and ran away).

Sometimes enraged people foam at the mouth like a rabid animal: Спор наконец дошёл до нетерпения, нетерпение до криков, крики даже до слёз, и Марк отошёл наконец с пеной бешенства у рта (The argument finally got so bad that they lost all patience, then the impatience led to shouts, and the shouts even led to tears, and Mark finally walked away, foaming at the mouth in rage).

With the right trigger, anyone can "become rabid" — приходить/прийти в бешенство: Узнав о письме, император пришёл в бешенство (When he found out about the letter, the emperor was livid).

Dogs and some other animals are said to raise their hackles when they are angry. Hackles are the hairs on the back of their necks, which they are clever enough to raise up like tiny flags announcing their fear and readiness to attack. In English annoying people and events can cause this: The court ruling really raised my hackles.

In Russian fur can stand on end (шерсть дыбом) or animals can stand on their back legs, often in a show of threat. The verb дыбиться is most commonly used to describe an animal rearing up on its hind legs. When describing animals, становиться or стать/встать на дыбы can mean that the animal is standing up: Медведь вскочил. Встал на дыбы. Между нами полметра (The bear dashed out and stood on his hind legs. There was just a half meter between us.)

Or, in the case of cats, it can mean that they are arching their backs to terrify hapless puppies and poorly behaved humans: Кошка встала на дыбы, шипит, рычит — прям лев (The cat arched her back, hissed and growled — a real lion).

In the case of humans, this expression indicates a show of anger — protesting against something, digging in their heels, and in general getting seriously annoyed. Я вставал на дыбы и возмущённо кричал (I got hopping mad and started shouting indignantly). Всё общество встало на дыбы, и суд признал указ незаконным (The entire country protested and the court ruled that the decree was illegal).

Щетиниться/ощетиниться is another verb pair that means to raise the fur/hair/stubble as a sign of threat. It comes from the word щетина, which in human men can refer to stubble before a shave and in animals refers to stiff hairs or bit of fur. I have found this most commonly in descriptions of cats: Шерсть щетинится у кошки на спине (The fur on the cat's back bristles). I've also found it used in descriptions of anything that sticks out in all directions: Разбитые окна цеха щетинятся осколками стекла (Shards of glass stick out in all directions in the broken windows of the shop).

But it can be used as metaphorical anger, as in this quote from Alexander Pushkin: Он мог бы чувство обнаружить, а не щетиниться, как зверь (He might have discovered his feelings rather than raising his hackles like a beast).

Another word for bristles or thorny objects is ёрш (one of several thorny fish, a bottle cleaner or chimney brush), which has produced the verb ершиться (to bristle, to get angry, to protest). This can be used in rather striking descriptions: При ветре кустики ершились, выворачивая листья, становились ещё серебрянее (When the wind blew the branches of the shrubs stuck out in all directions, twisting the leaves, and becoming even more silvery).

When used to describe people, it means to fly off the handle, mouth off, bristle, get riled up and act out. If you are this sort of person, your friends, family and significant other will often be telling you: Не ершись! (Don't lose your temper!) or asking: Ну что ты ершишься? (Ah, come on, why are you getting so mad about this?)

Be like your buddy over there, who says: На всё, в общем-то, наплевать (Well, basically, I just don't give a damn about anything).

These days that might be the best option.

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