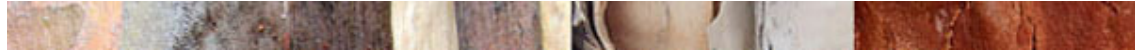


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Oxford Word of the Month – January: turbo chook

noun: a jocular name for the Tasmanian native hen, *Tribonyx mortierii*.

THE STORY BEHIND THE WORD OF THE MONTH

The Tasmanian native hen is a flightless moorhen endemic to the island of Tasmania. Although it is unrelated to the domestic hen, it was named a ‘native hen’ by the early European settlers, who applied the epithet ‘native’ to many Australian indigenous animals where they saw a resemblance to a familiar European species—hence terms such as *native bear* (koala), *native hedgehog* (echidna), and *native pheasant* (lyrebird).

In 1924 a scientific work gave this description of the Tasmanian native hen: ‘Runs exceeding fast, and many native dogs cannot catch a native hen even in open country.’ (Lord & Scott, *A Synopsis of the Vertebrate Animals of Tasmania*, 1924) A similar observation was made in 2004: ‘Despite their plump, chicken-like appearance, the Tasmanian Native Hen is estimated to reach speeds up to 50 kmh when its little legs wind up.’ (Launceston *Examiner*, 17 July) The comments about its speed and appearance suggest why it has recently been given the colloquial name **turbo chook**.

The first evidence for **turbo chook** occurs in a 2003 travel article about Maria Island, Tasmania, in which the writer mentions that native hens are called **turbo chooks**, ‘though these ones seem to have lost a few revs’. (*Australian*, 1 March) The *turbo* element of **turbo chook** is an abbreviation of *turbocharged*, referring to something that operates at an accelerated speed or goes at a fast pace. The second element, *chook*, is an Australian colloquial term for a domestic fowl dating from the 1850s. It is derived from a British dialect word, *chuck(y)*, with the same meaning. There is some evidence from the early 20th century of the term *chook* being applied to other birds, including the emu, but this is rare.

In recent years the term **turbo chook** has become more widely known in Tasmania, as these examples show:

Tasmania now has its own official flower and animal emblems. May I suggest the black currawong as our bird. It is large and robust, a great image, but also friendly. The only other contender in my opinion is the native hen or ‘**turbo chook**’ but it hasn’t quite got the image or what it takes. (Launceston *Examiner*,

15 June 2015)

I just dodged a **turbo chook** and hit a telegraph pole after eating some crayfish and flatties. (Hobart *Mercury*, 4 September 2016)

Turbo chook was probably used informally in Tasmania for some time before it occurred in the written record in the early 2000s. Although usage is largely confined to Tasmania where the bird is found, its appearance in the title of a popular 2013 children's picture book, Sonia Strong's *Tazzie the Turbo Chook Finds Her Feet*, indicates that the term may become more generally known in Australian English.

Turbo chook will be considered for inclusion in the next edition of the *Australian National Dictionary*.

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