

YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES



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Yosemite's Winter Wilderness

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Museum Preparator

In winter, within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park there lies a vast, snowbound wilderness, known only to the wild creatures living there, and to a few hardy men who infrequently visit it. The existence of such a region is little suspected by the hundreds of people who tramp over the high Sierra each year during July and August; still less do they suspect that their routes lead through the very heart of it. The high Sierra of Yosemite, which they know for a brief period, is changed to an unknown, hostile area during the wintry, stormy months. Then the winds, the snows and the wild things claim it for their own, and men seldom invade their sanctuary. This, then, is the wilderness of which I write.

NATURE STUDIED ON SKIS

It is a land possessing peculiar charm for the hardy outdoorsman who takes pleasure in studying wild life. The snow-covered mountains and meadows, upon which hundreds of wild animals have left their tracks, present an unusual opportunity for learning the habits of species which are seldom seen in the summer. Summer was once considered the open season for naturalists, who were supposed to lead a butterfly life, skipping gaily from flower to flower while the sun shone, but passing the winter in the larval stage as a bickworm. Such a life may appeal to a few, but

it is neither desirable nor possible in Yosemite. The ranger-naturalist who, in summer, guides a party of hikers over the six-day high Sierra trip, may in winter spend a portion of his time traveling on skis over the same route.

It was my pleasure to make just such a trip during the past winter in company with three other men: Park Rangers Ralph Anderson and Billy Merrill, and State Snow Gauger Harry During. They were engaged in a snow survey to determine possible water supplies available for irrigation in the San Joaquin valley, while my task was to make a winter survey of animal life. For five days we traveled through the high Sierra wilderness, 70 miles of it; sometimes advancing slowly through deep drifts or over rocky ledges, often gliding across the level snow on sparkling meadows or frozen lakes, and at rare intervals speeding down a dizzy slope on winged skis. Camps were made each night at various ranger stations, which had been stocked with provisions months before.

ANIMAL TRACKS NOTED

During the first day of our patrol we saw numerous tracks of coyotes, red squirrel and weasles. Harry also discovered the track of a marten on the opposite bank of the stream which we were following. This was a source of delight to Andy, but of some discomfort to

me; Andy succeeded in obtaining a good photograph, but I succeeded in landing in the water while crossing over for a closer inspection of the tracks. When we reached camp that night my wet clothes were frozen stiff; just another of those little things that make life interesting.

The art of camping in winter is simple, providing you possess the requisite amount of phlegmatic hardihood. You stumble into camp by starlight, so leg weary that your muscles cramp when stooping to loosen the frozen ski harness. Your fingers are numb by the time a fire is started, but with plenty of hot tea and soup you soon forget the cold. It is best, also, to forget that your wet socks have been hanging directly over the cooking soup. Remaining awake until the dishes are washed is a test of will power, but jumping out of your blankets into a zero atmosphere at 3 o'clock the next morning is an exhibition of pure recklessness. By the time breakfast is over your frozen boots have thawed enough to fit your feet. In spite of it all you leave camp before daylight with regret, knowing that these discomforts are as nothing compared with what you will be compelled to endure before reaching another camp late at night.

THROUGH TUOLUMNE PASS

While crossing Tuolumne Pass on the second day out we saw few indications of life. The wide tracks of "snow-shoe" rabbits (*Lepus t. sierrae*) and the birdlike imprints of pine squirrels were the only animal signs. The pine squirrels, or Sierra chickarees, were everywhere abundant; nearly half of all the tracks we saw were made by these industrious little fellows as they dashed from one lodgepole pine to another in search of nuts. In one place a squirrel had run down a

slope so fast that he skidded three feet in making a turn. While we were eating a noonday sandwich at Fletcher lake, 10,300 feet above the sea, several Clark crows came near in search of crumbs, and chickadees twittered merrily in the white barked pines above us. These little feathered bundles of cheer hold the same place among birds that chickarees do among animals. Both are everywhere present in the high Sierra below timberline, and both are invariably busy and happy.

IN FAMOUS MEADOWS

Our descent from the pass to Tuolumne Meadows was swift and easy. Anyone wishing to fly without troubling to grow wings should strap himself to a well waxed pair of skis and point them down a mountain side. To do it successfully requires concentration, as I discovered when my attention was diverted by a rabbit track. The next five minutes were spent in a snow bank, digging out and untangling various parts of myself. When eyes and ears were cleared of snow I saw Bill just above me in a similar predicament. I gathered from his highly decorated remarks that he didn't want any more thus-and-so naturalists spilling themselves right in his pathway, causing his own downfall.

At Tuolumne Meadows ideal tracking conditions were furnished by a light snow fall, upon which even the delicate tracings of numerous mice were plainly visible. The mice apparently constituted the chief food of several red foxes, tracks of which were often encountered. At one place a fox had slipped quietly up to a clump of brush into which a mouse track led. A disturbed patch of snow and a lack of departing mouse tracks showed what had happened.

Later in the day, as we neared Tenaya lake our trail was crossed

many times by tracks of marten, which have always been abundant in that region. Marten signs were also seen on the day following, as we made our way back to the Yosemite valley. One track proved particularly interesting, since it occurred in a dense lodgepole pine forest. Marten in the northern states and Canada are usually found in coniferous forests, but the race that inhabits this region seems to prefer open rocky hillsides, therefore, this track in the forest was a distinct surprise.

We stopped for coffee at the Snow Creek Ski Lodge, 4000 feet above Yosemite valley. The cook told us that he had a tame marten which would come up to the door to eat scraps which he left for it. It had often been seen by guests and

guides, but failed to appear during the brief time that we paused there.

Soon after leaving Snow Creek we dropped quickly down the trail to the warm, congenial air of Yosemite valley. Grouse were booming in the tops of the firs; robins and creepers were singing; tree toads were croaking around Mirror lake. This chorus of spring voices that filled the sun-bathed air almost caused us to forget the past five days spent in a winter climate; but the glistening snow fields above and behind us could not be completely ignored. They called us to return to them, soon, to read more tales of four-footed folk, and to explore more fully the wilderness which so few have seen, but which may in time become as well known as the winter resorts of Europe.

No Trout in Mono Region

C. A. HARWELL

Park Naturalist

This excerpt from a letter from Grant H. Smith, counselor-at-law, 657 Mills Building, San Francisco, makes an interesting nature note in itself.

"It may be of interest to you to learn that when the white men first came into the region east of the Sierras, from Mono lake southward for 150 miles, there were no trout in the streams or lakes. That was true, also, of the streams that flowed into Mono lake, namely, Mill creek, Lee Vining and Rush creeks, and all their tributaries. On the contrary, the Walker river and the Truckee river and all their tributaries teemed with native trout.

"The explanation appears to be that the great inland lake, of which Walker lake and Pyramid lake are the small remnants, was a great body of fresh water in which fish survived. Whereas, the great lake that covered the Mono basin and the Owens valley region was so impregnated with alkalies and salts that no fish could live in the...

"The miners that worked the rich placers at "Mono Diggings" in the 50's obtained their water from the Virginia Creek lakes, which are headwaters of the East Walker river, and were plentifully stocked with trout. Noting the absence of trout in the beautiful Lundy lake, these miners carried some over the mountain and stocked it. When Lundy became a flourishing mining camp in 1879 the lake was a fisherman's paradise.

"There were no trout in Lee Vining creek when I first visited it in 1880, although Rush creek had already been stocked, as well as the Owens valley streams.

"Lundy canyon today is one of the most picturesque and colorful gorges in all the Sierras, particularly in June when all the tall waterfalls are in full play; but it lacks the beauty and charm of 50 years ago, before the ruthless hand of man destroyed the splendid forest above the town and transformed the tree-lined gem of a lake into a bare reservoir."

TRIBUTE TO JOHN CONNESS

WASHINGTON, April 7.—Tribute was paid to the late John Conness, United States Senator from California, by the National Park Service when Director Horace M. Albright, on March 12, presented a striking photograph of Mount Conness to his son, Leland S. Conness.

Mount Conness, in Yosemite National Park, California, is the outstanding mountain of the High Sierra as viewed from the Tuolumne meadows, looking north. Its stately granite bulk dominates the landscape for miles.

The historian of the California mountains, Francis P. Farquhar, says in his "Place Names of the High Sierra" that the mountain was named for Senator Conness by Clarence King, later first director of the United States Geological Survey, but at that time a member of the Whitney Survey. Mr. King and James T. Gardiner were the first to climb the peak, making the ascent in 1864. Referring to the mountain, Mr. King said that because of its "firm peak with titan strength and brow so square and solid, it seems altogether natural we should have named it for California's statesman, John Conness."

TWO BIG WORKS

Two acts of the Senator are outstanding from the standpoint of conservationists. He introduced in the Senate the bill turning Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove over to the state for state park purposes, which became a law June 30, 1864; and he, according to Whit-

ney, deserves more than any other person the credit of carrying through the California Legislature the bill organizing the Geological Survey of California.

Yosemite Valley and Mariposa Grove, saved from encroachment or destruction under state supervision, in 1905 were turned back to the United States for inclusion in the Yosemite National Park, which had been established in the United States. It was not until 1901 that California established another, with the creation of the California Redwood Park in Big Basin. Later, in 1927, the state followed up the good start made through Senator Conness and passed a law establishing a State Park Commission and providing for a scenic survey of the state with the idea of expanding the state park system. Excellent results have been achieved under the resulting program.

Senator Conness was born in Ireland in 1821 and came to the United States as a boy of 15. In California he lived in the old mining town of Georgetown, in El Dorado county. He served two terms in the California State Legislature, and was United States Senator from that state from 1863 to 1865. In that year he moved to Massachusetts, where he lived until his death in 1909.

Leland S. Conness, to whom the picture of the mountain was presented, lives in Washington, representing newspapers from such varied places as California, West Virginia and Ottawa and Windsor, Canada.





LOCAL ABUNDANCE OF WINTER BIRDS

By C. C. Presnall, Assistant Park Naturalist

On a recent trip to Eagle Peak meadows and Boundary hill we were astonished by the large numbers of birds seen in the snow-covered forests between the elevations of 6500 and 8400 feet. In spite of a previous scarcity of birds around Yosemite, this particular trip was enlivened all the way by noisy flocks of juncoes, chickadees, kinglets and evening grosbeaks.

The grosbeaks were a distinct surprise. At noon, February 8, a flock of about 75 came to our camp fire, feeding in the tops of young red firs. This was at an elevation of 7250 feet. A thousand feet higher, on Boundary hill, the juncoes and redbreasted nuthatches were plentiful among Jeffrey pines. On our homeward way through dense groves of lodgepole pines large flocks of chickadees were often seen, and twice a flock of golden crowned kinglets passed slowly by, busily feeding as they went.

A few individuals of three other species were observed. Near Yosemite creek a group of hairy woodpeckers were quarreling high in a Jeffrey pine. Two canyon wrens on a steep chaparral-covered slope seemed equally imbued with a quarrelsome spirit. Still lower, along the series of cascades between the Upper and Lower Yosemite falls the rapid chatter of a lone kingfisher was heard.

The large numbers of birds seen on this trip, coupled with the previous scarcity noted by myself and others, confirms a characteristic of winter bird life that I have often noted. In tramping through winter woods a person may go several

miles without seeing or hearing a bird; then suddenly he will come into an area that is literally alive with birds of several kinds, moving and foraging slowly through the trees. These "super flocks," loosely composed of many flocks of different species, seem to be guided by a common factor in their wandering search for food.

YOSEMITE

When the sun across the valley
Gilds the face of old Half Dome
Giving notice day is waning;
Then the lengthening shadows
come.

Softly evening steals upon us,
Still the peaceful valley lies
While the Merced's rippling waters
Sing unending lullabies.

Quickly overhead the darkness
Shuts the peaks from out our sight
Lo, behold, the sky is studded
With the jewels of the night.

Day time, night time, wondrous
valley,

Oh! that man could only see
All of nature's many virtues
Gathered at Yosemite.

—G. T. Seater.

PACIFIC UNION COLLEGE FIELD SCHOOL

The Field School of Natural History of Pacific Union College, Angwin, Calif., will visit the park again this August, in charge of Dr. Clark. The climbing of Mount Lyell, as in past years, will no doubt be the climax of their field work.

BIRDS ALONG THE TRAIL

Enid Michael, Ranger-Naturalist

Ornithologically there was nothing in the order of high adventure, nevertheless there were outstanding days, and one such day came after the coldest night of the month. On February 2 a trip was made to Eagle Peak. At the foot of the trail, perhaps a hundred feet above the level valley floor, we came upon two Townsend solitaires and a small flock of western bluebirds. The birds were quarrelling over the possession of the choice mistletoe bunches. A little farther on there was a band of golden-crowned kinglets. After leaving the kinglets not another bird came to our attention on the long 3000-foot climb up the cliffs to the rim. Just over the rim a small flock of mountain quail was encountered and while we were eating lunch we caught sight of a lone red-shafted flicker and a lone chickadee. After lunch we traveled several miles through open forest, but did not see or hear a single bird. Half way down the zig-zags on our way back to the valley we came upon a lone blue-fronted jay. I don't believe we ever made a trip to the rim of the valley that we saw so few birds.

NUMEROUS JUNCOS

I almost forgot the adventure of the first day of the month. It was a bright sunny morning with thin clouds in the afternoon. I found a flock of perhaps 100 Sierra juncos feeding on the open ground at the edge of the apple orchard. These juncos acted as newcomers to the valley; they were very shy. By cautious approach I was able to get close enough to distinguish three slate-colored juncos among the number and there was also a lone gray-headed junco. This was my second record for this bird in the valley and possibly it was the very individual that was seen last month. Also feeding with the juncos was a very beautiful white-crowned sparrow. The whitecrown was a surprise as he had never before been noted in the valley during January, February or March. And another strange thing, this whitecrown was feeding on the ground 200 yards from the nearest brush patch. Seldom does a white-crowned sparrow stray far from the protecting shelter of a brush patch, but perhaps he felt the safety of numbers for

really in that great flock of birds there was just about one chance in a hundred that the whitecrown

TO VALLEY RIM

On February 14, with a party of four, I made the climb to Glacier Point. On Sunday we spent the day about the Point and made a ski to the top of Sentinel Dome. Monday we returned to the valley. Throughout the 14th snow fell continuously and there were 14 inches of fresh snow on the ground when the sun came into a clear sky on the morning of the 15th. Cheerful chickadees were up before the sun. They whistled their call-notes, but did not sing; too busy, perhaps, searching out food from the underside of the snow-laden pine boughs. A flock of golden-crowned kinglets and a pair of red-breasted nuthatches were also feeding in the neighborhood. From the manner of feeding it would appear that chickadee and kinglet are in direct competition along the forage lanes, and yet they get on nicely together; in fact these tiny birds of needle-tuft and fir-branch keep company all winter. The kinglets keep up a continuous tinkling chatter. The chickadees are not so garrulous.

On the trip to Sentinel Dome chickadees and golden-crowned kinglets were the only common birds. Twice Sierra creepers were noted, twice red-breasted nuthatches, once a hairy woodpecker, and once a white-headed woodpecker. No jays were seen, no grouse or quail. Back at the hotel another bird was added to the list. It was after lunch. I was on my way to the "overhanging rock" to have a look down into the valley, when a soft rattle of notes caught my ear—a rattle like a very much modified kingfisher's call, but not so light as the rattle of the slender-billed nuthatch. While the call was unfamiliar it did remind me of the call of the slender-billed nuthatch, and as I have frequently found the slenderbill above the "rim" during the winter months I began to look for this bird. Soon I caught sight of the bird, which I was able at once to identify as the Arctic three-toed woodpecker. The bird was apparently excited by my presence. He seemed particularly attracted to a certain tree which he kept com-

ing back to. This tree was a yellow pine and the trunk was scared by a scattered number of drillings. Some of these sap-pits were bleeding and in these the woodpecker was most interested. I wondered, but was unable to learn, if the three-toed was responsible for these drillings, or was he visiting the workings of some sapsucker. Because of the wide scattering of the pits I am inclined to believe the woodpecker responsible. So far as I know the sapsuckers are always much more systematic in their drilling operations. Later two three-toed woodpeckers were in sight at one time and during the next hour I got the impression that there were a half dozen in the neighborhood.

No other birds were seen during my stay at the Point, but on the way down the trail a canyon wren was seen to slip out of a pile of snow-covered boulders, fly about 50 feet and disappear into another cavern among the rocks.

▲ LONE ROBIN

February 21—Following the coldest night of the month the sun came up in a clear sky. At 1:30 the thermometer registered 22. The plaster of frozen mist that framed the upper Yosemite Fall and marked the wind drift of the night was both thick and white. Rainbow colors were playing in the drifting mist and the sky above the notch was brilliantly blue. On the woodpile back of the building the lone robin sat hunched and forlorn. He was almost too cold to be interested in his breakfast ration of raisins, but when I rolled and softened the raisins between my fingers and tossed them on the ground he flicked his tail a few times, dropped to my feet and managed to shake down his usual seven. Seven raisins is the usual number, but there are occasions when he can manage nine. After breakfast he flew away to the tall pine to doze in the grateful sunshine. Next I went to the ceanothus hedge, where I cracked some acorns on the stone and scattered a handful of chick-feed. The three towhees were eager for breakfast and could hardly wait until I got through marking the acorns. They flashed their perky tails, uttered their shrill scratchy notes and came so close that I

could see their ruby eyes. The jays perched, puffed and sient, pretending to ignore me, but when I stepped back they were right down for their share of the breakfast. Juncos came from all directions and were soon bickering with one another over the choice morsels.

MANY SPECIES NOTED

Leaving the postoffice, I followed the service road to the zoo, took the trail to the foot of Yosemite Fall. Here I turned back, crossed the sunny meadow that borders Yosemite creek, wandered through the orchard and went on across the Sentinel meadow to the river. Up stream I turned and followed close along the river bank, skirting the "river pool." I cut across the Kenneyville field and then back home. I was out from 7:30 until 9:30 and traveled at the rate of about one mile an hour; when birds are scarce I can make a little better time. This morning 23 species of birds were noted, some thrilling fellows among them. The high rolling call of the red-shafted flicker is mighty pleasant to the ear, and the flickers were in grand voice this morning. And I wondered why they should be so noisily gleeful, for surely this freezing morning they could not have breakfasted on a nest of ants. But another treat this morning. More thrilling than the flickers' call was the wild, free shouts of the great pileated woodpecker. He was excited this morning and as he circled above the cottonwoods shouting his wild, free call, I thought to myself, "Old fellow, you must be displaying your masculine charms to some fair female. After all these lonesome years, it would be grand if old cock-o'-the-woods had found a mate." But search as I did, I failed to find the beguiling female. Perhaps it was but a hope expressed.

JAY DEFIES HAWK

The jays shouted "Hawk! hawk! hawk!" There was no mad dash for cover as the great hawk sailed overhead. He circled and came to perch on the very tip of a tall pine, his red tail fanned in the morning sun. Birds don't fear the red-tailed hawk. One of the jays flew up to his high perch and sassied him to his very face. The hawk pretended not to notice. He did not even

shrug his shoulders, but soon he tired of the insulting chatter, spread his broad wings and sailed away down the valley.

In the shallows of the back-water pool a great blue heron was stalking. I was sorry to have disturbed him, but I did not see him in time. As he raised to wing, he uttered a croak of protest. He wasn't much scared, however, for he sort of flopped onto a perch in a cottonwood just across the river. A perched heron is not particularly interesting. Tomorrow I am going to try and sneak up on him and

catch him poaching. When the great blue heron fishes he is a dignified bird. Such a stately stride he has, such utter deliberation. I like, too, to see him glide down to the pond and drop his long legs.

The kingfishers were together this morning, gleefully on the wing in a dashing game of tag. High, rattled laughter. Love must be in the air in spite of the wintry chill. The five mallards were on the "river pool." They huddled close in the shadow of the far bank. I pretended not to see them.

Yosemite Bird Report for February

Ring-Necked Duck—The male ring-neck with his three females moved to Mirror lake and this being off the beat of our daily walks we did not see him often.

Mallard Duck—On four different occasions three males and two females were seen on the "river pool."

Great Blue Heron—A lone bird noted February 20 and 21.

Band-Tailed Pigeon—On February 8, three birds were seen and on February 19, two.

Cooper Hawk—A lone bird seen on February 26.

Red-Tailed Hawk—A lone individual noted February 20.

Sparrow Hawk—A single bird twice noted.

Horned Owl—On three different nights a pair hooted a duet.

Hairy Woodpecker—Not numerous. No doubt a few birds present throughout the month, although there were days when we failed to find a single bird.

Willow Woodpecker—Rare. Possibly present daily, although there were many days when we failed to locate a single one.

White Headed Woodpecker. A pair noted about the mouth of Indian canyon. Seldom noted elsewhere.

Pileated Woodpecker—A lone individual noted February 22. On this occasion I suspected that there was a second bird in the neighborhood, but I was unable to locate him.

California Woodpecker—Common in all the Kellogg oak groves on the north side of the valley.

Red-Shafted Flicker—Present daily. Apparently more numerous the last week of the month.

Blue-Fronted Jay—Likely to be found in any section of the valley, but most numerous about the new village.

Red-Winged Blackbird—A lone bird noted February 26.

California Purple Finch—Rare. Pairs noted several times during the last week of the month.

Pine Siskin—Rare. Small flocks noted on several occasions and on February 9 a flock of 20.

White-Crowned Sparrow—On February 1, a lone bird was noted on the ground feeding with a flock of juncos.

Pigmy Owl—A lone individual seen February 23.

Belted Kingfisher—To be found daily on their regular beats.

Slate-Colored Junco—For the first 15 days of the month there were five or six with the flock of 30 Sierra Juncos that foraged back of the postoffice. February 27 I failed to find a single slate-color, and on the 28th just one was seen.

Sierra Junco—At least four flocks of from 20 to 30 birds present throughout the month.

Sacramento Towhee—Daily three were present at the feeding station, sometimes four. Also two in the ceanothus thicket near the zoo.

Hutton Vireo—A pair probably present throughout the month about the mouth of Indian canyon.

Audubon Warbler—Two birds seen on the first day of the month.

Water Ouzel—One ouzel reported as being present daily about the fish hatchery. A lone bird twice noted on the river back of the Sentinel Hotel.

Canyon Wren—Present daily and often heard singing from a rock slide in the mouth of Indian canyon.

Sierra Creeper—Common. Song frequently heard during the month.

Red-Breasted Nuthatch. Rarely seen or heard this month.

Mountain Chickadee. Rare, but a pair present daily back of the postoffice. Occasionally noted in other sections.

California Bush-tit—A flock of perhaps 20 noted on several occasions in the mouth of Indian canyon.

Golden-Crowned Kinglet—Common. Flocks likely to be found in any section of the valley.

Ruby-Crowned Kinglet—Individuals likely to be found in any section of the valley. Usually one with every flock of golden-crowns.

Townsend Solitaire—A lone bird frequently noted.

Western Robin—A lone bird present daily. February 26 nine seen.

Western Bluebird—Probably present daily. They have left the oaks and mistletoes and are feeding in the meadows.



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Dan Anderson