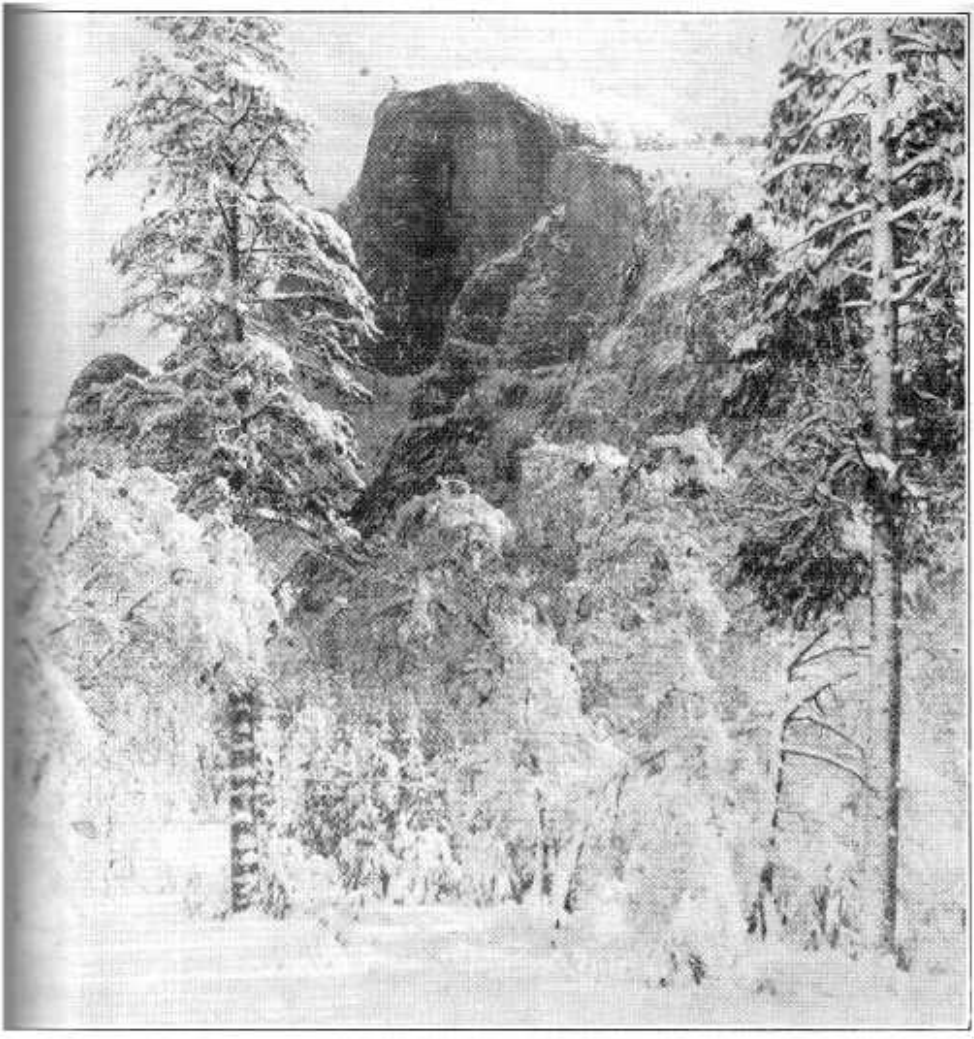
YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES



APRIL, 1932

Volume XI Number 4

Yosemite Nature Notes

THE PUBLICATION OF
THE YOSEMITE EDUCATIONAL DEPARTMENT
AND THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION
Published Monthly

Volume XI April 1932 Number 4

Hibernating Bears

C. A. HARWELL Park Naturalist

Late in January Dr. Don Tresidder and party returning from a ski trip to Mount Watkins reported the discovery of two hibernating bears, one at 7000 feet elevation near Snow creek, the other at 8000 feet elevation near the summit of Mount Watkins. Reports of these dens were given publicity through the newspapers and ever since that time I have been eager to check up on the stories and especially to get some photographs of such dens and possibly hibernating bears.

February 23, Ranger Naturalist A. E. Borrell and I armed ourselves with three cameras and some other supplies and made the trip on snowshoes to Ski Lodge, in the vicinity of these dens. We were accompanied by a snow-gauging party of three rangers on this first day's trip. After a hard, though not dangerous, struggle up the trail we arrived at the lodge at 6 p. m. This two-story cabin was so nearly buried by snow that we had some difficulty locating it—in fact we found our easiest entrance was through the second-story window. The Yosemite Park and Curry Company keeps this cabin well stocked with food, wood and comfortable beds for a party of 14, so we were soon well taken care of.

Next morning Borrell and I started bear hunting, while the rangers were off to Tuolumne Meadows. Eight to 10 feet of snow had fallen since these bear dens were last seen and we were unable to locate either of them, although we spent a day and a half searching. We did find fresh bear tracks near the summit of Mount Watkins.

BEAR TRACKS FOUND

March 2 I had a second and better opportunity to locate these hibernating bears. Paul Shoe, executive secretary of the company, arranged to send Ranger Ralph Anderson and myself up the trail on horses, which of, course, saved us a lot of hard work, as our camera equipment gave us each 30-pound packs to carry. A cold night had left a marvelous crust on the snow so that, although we carried snowshoes, we did not need to wear them on the entire two-day trip.

March 3 Ski Instructor Jules Frisch accompanied Ralph Anderson and me on a search for the upper bear den. Mr. Frisch was the one who had first observed this den, but in two hours' searching we

were unable to locate any trace of it. We returned to the cabin at 10:45 and, accompanied by Oscar Chase, we started on a search for the lower den. Mr. Chase had passed this den February 10. At that time he was attracted by noises which he thought came from newly-born cubs. At 11:30 Mr. Chase led us directly and very quietly to a living white fir tree, five feet in diameter, and pointed to the hole in the snow at the base of the tree, on the uphill side, and whispered to us, "That the den."

UNEARTHLY SOUNDS

With as little noise as possible we began setting up cameras. I chose for my station the top of a dead fir stump, 10 feet above the snow and 15 feet from the den where I could get an excellent view directly through to the entrance of the den. We took numbers of pictures, both still and movie. Now we planned to scare the bear out while I would grind out movies of his exit from his winter quarters. We were all ready to start our noise when a sudden gust of wind struck the top of the tree with such force that the heavy trunk was swayed. An unearthly noise came from the base of our tree. Three of us were scared to death, but only two of us could run—I was up a stump! As might be expected in such haste the men soon fell head over heels in the snow. Fortunately it was nothing more than the cracking of the ice.

We barked like dogs, threw sticks against the tree, but no sounds came from the four-foot deep hole through the snow. Ranger Anderson, armed with a long curved stick, became bolder. He thrust this into the burned-out cavity of the tree. When he pushed the stick straight back it seemed to run into something soft. Was it a sleeping bear or was it the litter of pine needles we could plainly see sticking from the fire burn? He proved the hole extended back in either direction at least three feet. With all his prodding and shouting we heard no sounds from the bear. We gave up and decided to have lunch. We sat quietly watching and listening for one hour, but no results.

At 2 o'clock we decided we must leave on our homeward journey by 3 o'clock. Becoming more frantic for positive results we decided to use our snowshoes as shovels to dig out the bear. The bottom of the hole through the snow, which measured four feet in depth and about 18 inches in diameter at the bottom, showed that the bear had traveled in and out numbers of times, as it was very smooth and icy. There were no tracks on the top of the snow, so that we concluded the bear had not been out of his den for at least two weeks. Our purpose in digging was to lower a camera by a string to the level of the entrance and then to make an attempt to set off flashlight enough to get a photograph of the interior of the tree to give us more positive evidence of its contents.

PROOF ESTABLISHED

Snow shoes proved to be poor shovels. Broken pits of snow and ice kept falling and blocking the entrance. When we had dug down as far as it seemed possible to go we found we would have to remove some of these blocks of snow. Snow shoes wouldn't work, so Ralph Anderson decided he would cautiously remove the largest of them with his hands. Down he stooped. As his hand neared the entrance to the den a paw reached out with lightning speed so characteristic of a bear and Ralph came up holding

a bloody hand. The bear had struck a sharp blow and fortunately only one claw had taken effect, leaving a triangular flesh wound on the back of his left hand. Our evidence was positive. The cave was occupied and we were satisfied. We quickly bandaged the hand, packed our cameras and retreated to the valley, leaving the bear in possession of his den and his secrets. If there were cubs in the hollow of the tree they certainly were silent. There was positively no odor about the den. Scratches on the tree showed that it had been climbed many times to a limb about 30 feet above the ground. However, the ragged points of ice at snow level showed that the tree had not been climbed for about a month.

Our past observations of bears in Yosemite have led us to believe that hibernation was often interrupted, since bears are often seen abroad during the winter. This theory was definitely confirmed by the condition of the den on Snow creek. The smooth, hard-packed entrance showed that the bear had kept his den open in spite of many heavy snowstorms; and evidences of activity after each storm were revealed by alterante layers of clean and soiled snow which we exposed by digging alongside the entrance, each layer showing bark and wood fragments, but no droppings. Further information concerning the hibernation of bears will be sought in the near future when we expect to make additional trips to this den.

Water Ouzels Nesting at El Portal

By C. C. PRESNALL **Junior Park Naturalist**

An astonishing thing occurred February 29 at the Yosemite Museum. Bert Harwell, the park naturalist, and I were standing in a foot of snow at the back door of the museum, admiring the cold, forbidding aspect of the ice-covered cliffs in Indian canyon, and thinking of the months that must elapse before we could again hunt water ouzel nests in that canyon, when Bert casually remarked that he had seen an ouzel building a nest that very day. I could scarcely believe, looking at the wintery scene about me, that birds could be building nests in the warm spring sunshine less that 15 miles away, near El Portal.

The next day I went to see for myself and to experience the thrill of going from winter to spring in half an hour. Modern magic of motor transportation carried us down 2000 feet nearer the sea and two months nearer to summertime; to a sunny river bank, where for four hours we sat listening to the incomparable song of the ouzel as he and his mate built their honeymoon cottage of moss. What a busy pair they were! Often they worked so fast that my wife and I could hardly record their activities. One of us would concentrate his attention on four rods of river bank, two birds, one nest, and one stop-watch, while the other would talk his rapid-fire dictation and try at the same time to make detailed observations through the binoculars. One bird, usually the female, would fly into the round oven-shaped nest, where we could indistinctly see her weaving the moss which her mate brought to her at short intervals, sometimes making a trip every half minute.

SOLDIERS ON JOB

Once the male became tired and

neglected his duties, whereupon the female poked her head out of the door, waited patiently for one minute, and then flew to the water's edge. Soon both birds returned to the nest at once, remained inside half a minute, then one flew out and resumed his "hod-carrier" role. The "bricks" he carried were bits of moss torn loose from spray-drenched rocks below the nest. Usually he would wash the moss before carrying it to the nest, but once when gathering from a higher ledge, he neglected to do so. All the material gathered was used on the interior of the nest or at the entrance. Usually one bird stayed in the nest less than four minutes and often both would be making quick trips back and forth every minute. We could never distinguish the sexes, except when the male sang; then we would keep track of him for several trips, but sooner or later both birds would go into the nest at one time and we could never be sure which was which when they came out

FOUR BUILDING PERIODS

Is it any wonder that we breathed a sigh of relief whenever the ouzels ceased building to rest and feed awhile? This they did at intervals of from 15 to 35 minutes, so that during our four-hour vigil there were four building periods, four feeding periods of about the same duration and one long period, one hour and 18 minutes, of feeding, singing and preening. Once during this period the male sang continuously for four minutes. It is interesting to note that the female preened her feathers over twice as long as did the male. To our dull eyes she looked as plain and drab as her spouse, but to him she must have been very beautiful.

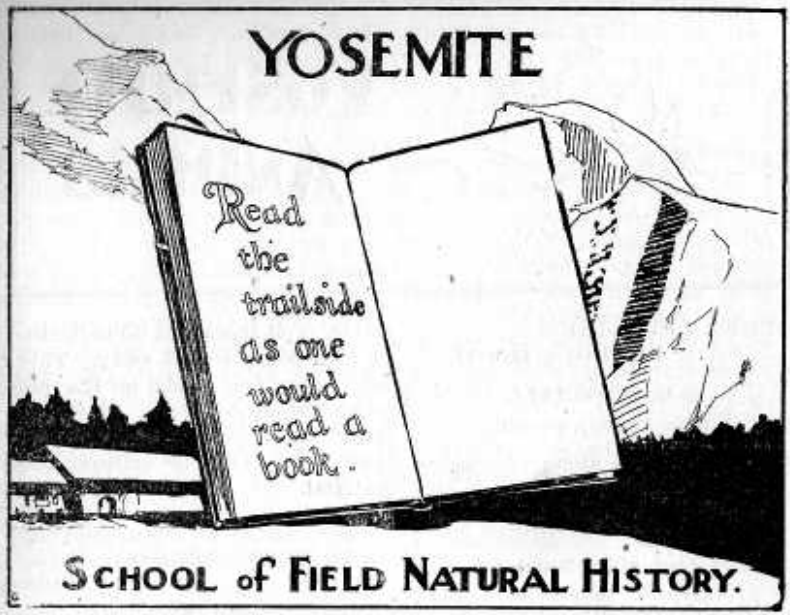
We left the happy pair late in the afternoon and climbed back again to our wintery home in Yosemite. On the way we stopped at three points along the Merced river and at each point saw an ouzel, none of which showed any symptoms of spring romance. It will be interesting to follow the epidemic of spring fever which will spread slowly uphill, affecting each ouzel in turn, until finally in late June the nest building urge reaches the birds away up near timberline.

A BARN OWL IN YOSEMITE

By George M. Wright, Field Naturalist

Happily enough, the roll call for birds reported from the floor of Yosemite valley will never be complete. In 1931, on the evening of November 27, a barn owl, Tyto alba pratincola (Bonaparte), placed itself squarely in front of our headlights on the road, thus recording, insistently as it seemed to us, its right to be on the membership list for birds that have visited Yosemite. It was at 9:15 o'clock, about 100 yards from the entrance gate on the drive that leads to the Ahwahnee Hotel by the talus slope of the Royal Arches.

The road was glistening from scraped snow after the storm. An owl of medium size flew down from the black night above into the area lighted by our car. It turned a monkey-face toward us and we knew it for a barn owl. The burnished yellow of its back and whitish underparts harmonized beautifully with the snowy scene. For about 12 seconds it gave us a cold stare, then floated away among the trees and rocks of the talus, as casually asthough this were home in the lowlands and not the incomparable Yosemite.



Yosemite to Conduct Eighth Field School

C. A. HARWELL, Park Naturalist

Sixty interested students in the field of nature education have applied for admittance to this summer's session of the Yosemite School of Field Natural History, June 23 to August 10. The selection of the twenty students for the 1932 School has just been made.

The purpose of this school is to train young men and women to be better qualified to take places in the growing field of nature guiding. National Park Service selects graduates of this school for temporary summer time ranger-naturalists, as well as to fill vacancies in the permanent naturalists positions.

ALUMNI ORGANIZED

The school now has 140 alumni in over 20 different States. An Alumni Association has been formed to keep the members in touch with each other and in touch with the progress of the naturalist program in our national parks. It is, of course, impossible to get the whole group together at one time, so local organizations have been formed. Those living in the Los Angeles region hold annual spring and fall reunions. The San Francisco bay region group will meet at Lokoya Lodge in Napa county for their first reunion, February 27-28. An eastern group has planned to meet at Maine Woods this summer.

Anyone interested in this course offered at Yosemite should address C. A. Harwell, Park Naturalist. At least two years' college training and a good science background is required.

YOSEMITE ANIMALS

SIERRA CHICKAREE CHANGES HIS DIET

C. C. PRESNALL
Junior Park Naturalist

The chickarees along Chilnualna creek have this winter tapped a new and limitless food supply; they are emulating the porcupine—eating the bark from the slender twigs of the Lodgepole pines. In skiing through the dense pine forests of this region it is a common sight to see the snow beneath a Lodgepole pine littered with branch tips, cut off by the squirrels during their feast.

I caught one little fellow in the very act. He was on the end of a slender branch about ¼-inch in diameter, eating the bark off for a distance of 2 to 3 inches. About 2 inches from the end of the branch he bit clear through the wood and allowed the needle-covered tip to fall to the ground. Then, noticing my approach, he scampered down the tree and across an intervening snowbank to his home in a dead snag. Tracks indicated that he had made four trips between his home an dthe pine tree during the two and a half days elapsed since the last snowstorm. A close examination of his work showed some twigs girdled but not cut off; none of the twigs cut were over ¼-inch in diameter, and there was no indication of feed being stored away. There were very few seeds in the pine cones examined along Chilnualna creek, which might explain the extensive use of this unusual food material.

DEER SEEN FEEDING IN DEEP SNOW

By C. C. Presnall, Junior Park Naturalist

Along the lower borders of the snow fields which cover Yosemite National Park throughout the winter one may occasionally find signs indicating that the deer wintering on the grass-covered slopes of the adjacent foothills make excursions into the deep snow. We found such an instance near Chinquapin Ranger Station in late January while returning from an eight-day ski trip. The snow at that time measured 5.25 feet at Chinquapin, and at the point where we first saw deer tracks—a mile east of and 300 feet above Chinquapin—the snow must have been six feet deep—hard packed snow into which the deer sank only a foot.

The fresh tracks roughly paralleled our course and it was not long until we saw the deer, two bucks and a doe, running from a

clump of incense cedars. Going to the spot, we found that they had been feeding on the tender leaves and staminate flowers of the cedars. Although several shrubs of Ceanothus cordulatus (snow-bush) protruded above the snow nearby, the deer had not touched them.

As we continued our homeward journey, we noticed six well defined deer trails crossing the road between Chinquapin and the upper tunnel portal (about 4620 feet elevation, just below Inspiration Point). All these trails showed fresh tracks going both up and down hill, and one led to some sheltering-like oaks, where there were indications of a sleeping place.

The presence of deer at these elevations (4600 to 6500) is readily explained by the proximity of their winter range. The steep slopes near Chinquapin bring regions of green grass and heavy snow so close together that the deer can go from the Upper Sonoran Zone (their normal winter habitat) to the Canadian Zone without traveling very many miles.

CROWS IN YOSEMITE VALLEY

By C. C. Presnall, Junior Park Naturalist

The American crow, noted for its ubiquity, is relatively uncommon in California, many areas of the State being almost free from the harsh noisy clamor of this bird. Small wonder, then, that I should remain a resident of Yosemite valley for three years before seeing one. It was on the morning of March 26 that I heard him cawing as he flew up the valley; soon he appeared, stopped for a minute in an oak tree in the new village, then continued his flight up the valley.

The scarcity of crows in Yosemite aroused my curiosity, but inquiries produced only a meager array of facts. Charles Michael's records, kept since 1920, show that from one to eight crows have been seen nearly every spring and fall, but only for a few days at a time. Other observers report that crows are usually seen flying up river in the spring and down river in the fall. This suggests the interesting possibility of a trans-mountain migration by a few pioneer crows. Banding is the only way to corroborate this theory, but observations along possible fly ways in the higher mountains would be helpful. Tenaya lake would probably be a good observation station.

WHAT RECORDS SHOW

The following tabulation, taken largely from Charles Michael's records, shows the occurence of American crows in Yosemite valley to date:

1920, October; 1921, March, April and November; 1922, March, April, October and November; 1923, April, May and October; 1924, March, April and November; 1925, March; 1926, October and November; 1927 March; 1928, April; 1929, none; 1930, March and October; 1931, October; 1932, March.

Other authentic observations are needed. Anyone having noted crows anywhere in Yosemite National Park is asked to communicate with Park Naturalist C. A. Harwell, giving dates, places and pertinent facts.

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Auto Caravans are now conducted daily to points of interest on the floor of the valley.

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SAY PHOEBE (SAYORNIS SAYUS)

By Enid Michael, Ranger-Naturalist

He was recognized by the flit of his tail. As I looked at him I realized that he was garbed in the colors so fashionable among the female robins. His back was smoke gray, his tail dark, and his underbody a rich buff. As he perched on the fence wire he continually turned his head from side to side. Out into the air he dived, sweeping low over the ground. There came the sound of snapping mandibles, a quick turn, and back he came to his perch on the fence. After alighting he flicked his tail five or six times as though trying to catch his balance. But he was not really trying to catch his balance, he has the tail-flicking habit. All of our flycatchers and many other kinds of birds have the habit of flitting their tails or wings when they come to perch, but each different species has its own peculiar manner of so doing, and, if sufficiently well known, may be recognized by the flit of the tail.

The Say phoebe, my bird of today (March 20, 1932), brought his tail down with a slow jerk and at the some time fanning it out. Just when it was fanned the widest it flashed shut and came up with a snap.

LOOKING FOR MORE FOOD

After the tail-flicking episode the Say Phoebe wiped his bill on the foot-rail, lifted his head and came to poise, except for the constant turning of his head. He was on the lookout for another insect and then he would have to wipe his bill again.

In silhouette the Say phoebe has a rakish, low-browed appearance. He is flat-headed, with a suggestion of a crest at the back of his crown.

The call-note of this phoebe is not short and choppy, but plaintive and drawn out like a softly whistled note on a reed pipe. This note is remindful of the single plaintive note of the killdee, but softer and more pleasing to the ear.

This brown flycatcher with the dark tail is a rare bird in Yosemite Valley. From our 10-year record it would seem that an idividual, or perhaps a few individuals, pass through the valley at the late end of winter or early in spring. Hardly a March month passed during the last 10 years that we did not see the one lovely Say phoebe. And today a new record was established when five different individuals were seen.

NOTELETS

Nightly Bear lectures were started at the Bear feeding platforms on April 9, with eight bears on hand to enjoy the banquet.

The heavy winter seemingly has had little effect on the activities of our birds. Spring arrivals are coming on time and nesting activities are under way. On March 24, the Water Ouzels at Valley View had their nest practically completed.

Sierra Creepers were observed building a nest April 13.

"Oh, Ranger!", a book full of interesting stories about our National Parks, by Albright and Taylor, has been reduced in price from $2.50 to $1.00. You should take advantage of this big reduction. Order a copy now from the Museum.