

YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES



DEPARTMENT *of* THE INTERIOR
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE

Volume XI

May 1932

Number 5

Yosemite Nature Notes

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

Volume XI

May 1932

Number 5

Little Haymakers of the Sierras

By ARTHUR STUPKA,

Ranger-Naturalist

High up in the timberline region of our western mountain ranges lives the cony, a little gray-brown haymaker of the heights. Its most closely related cousins are the rabbits, and from these it differs somewhat in appearance, in habits, and especially in the kind of environment which it chooses for its home.

In size and general appearance the conies resemble guinea pigs. The ears are rounded, the body short and compact, and the tail almost wholly lacking. These strange little animals live among the rocks high up on the slopes of the Rockies and the Sierra Nevadas. Their companions are the marmots, the alpine chipmunks, the picket-pin ground squirrels, and, in some areas, the wild mountain goats.

In the High Sierra of Yosemite National Park, where my observations on the conies were made, very few species of trees dared venture to the rugged heights where these little fur-bearers dwelt. It is a region which fairly overwhelms you with its great stretches of gray granite mountains, a region where existence for both plant and animal life is severe, a region where per-

sistent winds play over ice fields which may linger throughout the summer.

Life at this high elevation is hard—hard as the rocks which make up the mountains—hard as the stony cry of the Clark's crow which dares to wing its way to this bleak height. Even the high-pitched "check-ick" of the conies is in harmony with the surroundings, for you can duplicate it by merely striking two rough pieces of granite together. In this bleak country there is no summer and no autumn. Spring comes late, remains six or eight weeks, and is followed by a long cold winter. Such is the home of the cony.

HAYING SEASON

In August and September the conies are busy cutting the scattered growths of the high-mountain flowers and grasses. These plants are carried to the haystack which, though open to the bright sun, is sheltered from the rain by its position against the rocks. I have come upon fresh sweet-smelling stacks of this kind which contained as much as three bushels of plant material. After being cured in the sun, the hay is transported

to some shelter lying deep down in the interstices of the rocks. This, then, becomes the food of the cony during the many months when deep blankets of snow cover the mountain sides.

Little is known of the cony's winter activities. This is largely due to the slide-rock which, when covered with snow, makes footing extremely precarious. Safe is the cony from foxes, bears and birds of prey at this time of year. But never is he safe from the most dangerous enemy of all, the blood-thirsty mountain weasel. Near timberline, I have attracted the attention of these sinewy-bodied killers by making a series of sharp squeaky notes, and have watched the slender, beady-eyed animals running nervously over the rocks as though expected momentarily to come up the form of some luckless prey. Capable of following the cony wherever the little hay-maker may choose to go, the mountain weasel brings death to large num-

bers of these rock-dwellers.

THEIR HIGH RANGE

Near Washburn lake, at an elevation of approximately 7600 feet, was the lowest elevation at which I have seen or heard conies in Yosemite National Park. The highest range of these animals goes up almost to the summits of the very highest mountains—at least to 12,500 feet on the slopes of Mt. Dana, second highest mountain in the park. At the foot of Lyell Glacier, on the slopes of Vogelsang, near Ireland lake, and no doubt in the slide-rock slopes of all the glacial cirques in the Yosemite, these animals are to be found in greater or less number. For one to encounter them in this high country where the trees are often reduced to prostrate scrawny forms and where only a limited number of living things have maintained themselves in the severe struggle for existence, is a revelation and an experience never to be forgotten.

Beginning of Nature Guiding

By C. A. HARWELL,

Park Naturalist

Our half million visitors a year to Yosemite are coming more and more to appreciate the opportunities offered by our museum, our program of popular lectures at camps and resorts and our organized trips afield under the leadership of well trained ranger-naturalists. During the last season in Yosemite 278,000 people visited the Yosemite Museum, 250,000 park visitors were in attendance at our lectures and 23,000 nature lovers went out with our naturalist guides on field trips, auto caravans, or longer hikes through the high Sierra. This is a relatively new

movement in our national parks but its rapid growth attests the fact of its very worthwhileness.

We are often asked how this naturalist program started. Recently Assistant Park Naturalist Ed Beatty was congratulated upon his appointment by C. M. Goethe of Sacramento. In correspondence that followed this interesting account of the starting of this activity was submitted by Mr. Goethe who was for years president of the California Nature Study League and who is now connected with the Immigration Study Commission. He wrote:

"In Norway and in Switzerland, curiously enough, was found the original nature guide work that has spread to our national parks. As president of the World Recreation Survey I made certain studies there over a quarter of a century ago. This world-wide movement was inaugurated that the then novel American playground technique might be made available for overseas lands. In making the world survey, it developed that certain other nations had types of recreation work valuable to us. Nordic Europe had, for example, the highly organized nature-study field-excursion.

LEADING THE BLIND

"This work was studied in Scotland, England, Holland, Germany, Switzerland, Scandinavia. The nature excursion for the blind in Denmark, utilizing songs of wild birds, was made available to blind schools throughout the world. In Germany, industrial magnates insisted Germany's superiority in world trade was largely based upon Germany's scientific training commencing with nature field excursions, that such training made for alertness in business. A similar tradition is handed down in Huguenot families. The latter believe their usual business ability is largely due to generations of similar training of their young. Switzerland and Norway considered the nature guide movement an asset commercially. It attracted tourist travel. It also was a valued part of their educational system. In Switzerland the nature guide work was expanded into a system of exchange of material throughout the German, the French and the Italian speaking world. This was conducted along the lines of our former 'Agassiz Association

"By 1918, Mrs. Goethe and I hav

ing developed the technique of nature guiding, offered the University of California to finance a first unit of nature guide work at a string of California resorts. They suggested Lake Tahoe as strategically the best area. The university conferred with Dr. H. C. Bryant of its faculty, then consultant to California Fish and Game Commission. Arrangements were concluded with six Tahoe resorts for a free program of daytime field work and evening lantern slide lectures, motion pictures, camp fire talks. Dr. Loye Miller of Los Angeles co-operated with Dr. Bryant in inaugurating the work.

INVITATION FROM MATHER

"In the autumn of 1919 the late Director Mather, traveling from Yosemite to Sacramento by way of Tioga Pass, stopped at Fallen Leaf. He observed the auditorium was so crowded for the evening lecture that people actually stood outside at doors and windows to hear. Director Mather, then struggling with certain amusement concerns that wanted to convert Yosemite into a gigantic Coney Island, with ferris wheels and 'hot dogs,' invited us to abandon the Tahoe work to the Yosemite base. He declared that such work was the best backfire against commercializing Yosemite. As there was no Government appropriation at the time, the Yosemite work was financed partly by Director Mather and partly by Mrs. Goethe and myself. Dr. Bryant and Dr. Miller, who had both been pledged for the 1920 campaign at Tahoe, agreed to transfer their activities to Yosemite. The California Fish and Game Commission again co-operated with the National Park Service. Thus began the nature guide movement, which has since spread to all of the national parks."



Yosemite Falls Ice Cone

Norman Clyde (*upper*) well known mountaineer and Ed. Beatty, Ass't. Park Naturalist, climbing the cone.

Photo by Bert Harwell, Park Naturalist.

A Trip to the Ice Cone

M. E. BEATTY, Assistant Park Naturalist

This years ice cone at the base of the Upper Yosemite Fall was the largest for several years. On February 20, Park Naturalist Bert Harwell, Norman Clyde, the well known mountaineer, and the writer decided to explore and photograph it. We left early in the morning equipped with ice axe, rope and cameras.

The trip was made by way of a narrow ledge or shelf which leads along the north wall of the valley directly to the crest of the Lower Yosemite Fall. From there we made our way up the steep granite walls to the base of the Upper Fall, after depending several times on our rope and the alpine experience of Norman Clyde.

Our effort to emulate mountain goats was rewarded, for before us stood the ice cone rising from the base of the Upper Fall to a height which we estimated as nearly 300 feet. It stood like an inverted funnel, the base occupying nearly the entire width of the miniature hanging valley and rising on a 45 to 60 degree slope to a sharp peak at the top. Several factors combine in forming the cone; snow and ice floating over the brink, spray freezing on the cone and ice masses which plaster the margins of the fall each cold night dropping on the cone as daytime brings warmer temperatures.

Norman Clyde and I cut steps on a zig-zag up the side of the cone to within 30 feet of the top where we were forced to stop due to the heavy barrage of ice falling from 1400 feet above. Bert Harwell took pictures as we climbed and also as we slid down the cone using our knapsacks

as toboggans.

The cone generally disappears about the first of April, sometimes causing floods around Yosemite Creek. This year it melted gradually and by the middle of April had entirely disappeared.

This ice cone is always of interest. It can be plainly seen from the south side of the valley and each winter thousands study it from there with binoculars and cameras but few become so intimate with it as our party of three.

YOSEMITE MUSEUM NATURE LIBRARY

By Ruth Casaday, Librarian

Yosemite National Park is the pioneer among national parks in the organization and cataloguing of its library. The work has begun this past summer through the initiative of park officials and the stimulation of the American Library Association committee on libraries in national parks, of which C. E. Graves is chairman. The survey of book collections in national parks made by the committee showed Yosemite to have approximately 3000 volumes, the largest collection in any park. The books are all gifts, the Yosemite Natural History Association being the donor of many of them. The Yosemite Museum Nature Library is a special library of books on Yosemite lore and nature study, but it seems advisable to have a supplementary collection of books on general subjects for guests and residents who desire to pursue studies in other fields or to read widely

for information or recreation. Those who will use the library are the park naturalist and his staff, park officials, permanent residents of the park, park guests and specialists who visit the library for research purposes.

During last summer 503 books were catalogued. This entailed the ordering of Library of Congress cards, accessioning of each book, classifying and cataloguing each title, typing and filing of the cards, embossing, painting and pasting each volume, and keeping a statistical record of the work done. The catalogue contained 1341 cards at the end of the summer. The first copy of every title was made reference so that a copy of every book owned by the library could be had upon request. All library technique employed was in accordance with modern library practice so that the work can be carried on easily by succeeding librarians. As yet the position of librarian is a temporary one for the summer months only.

LOOKING AHEAD

The future of the National Park Library is, indeed, bright, for there is much to be done in the way of initiating new ideals and in the achieving of ideals already set. Each national park of any size should have a permanent resident librarian and her duties will range through the entire field of library science. A few of the specific tasks that suggest themselves are as follows:

1. The preparation of a biography of the entire library and of special subjects. These lists would be helpful to specialists in various fields and of great assistance in building up that particular collection of books and collections in other national parks.

2. The making of effective displays of subjects emphasized in the park museum. This is especially desirable since most of the libraries are located near or are closely associated with the museums, and such displays would aid in the educational program of the National Park Service.

3. The exchanging of material with the various national park libraries, other libraries and book agencies in order to make the library collection more complete in its chosen field.

4. The searching for material requested by the park naturalist and any member of the staff or the public.

5. The preparation of material for a periodical bulletin containing information of new books and publications of interest from a national park viewpoint.

NOTED VISITORS

The national park librarian meets many interesting people. Last summer Dr. Ray Lyman Wilbur, secretary of the interior, visited the library and inspected it quite thoroughly, since this was the first experiment of any national park in the library field. Dr. Clark Wissler, curator of the American Museum of Natural History, also visited the park and was extraordinarily interested in the progress of the library. He offered many valuable suggestions and was very sympathetic to the library movement in national parks.

The beginning step in organized national park libraries has been made at Yosemite, but there is much left to be done. Other national parks soon will begin the cataloguing of their books, and the field for the national park librarian offers much opportunity for initiative and service.

**THE YELLOW-BILLED MAGPIE,
A NEW BIRD FOR THE YO-
SEMITE REGION**

By Ranger-Naturalist A. E. Borell

Yellow-billed magpies are especially interesting because their range lies entirely within the State of California. Even within the State they are very local in their distribution. They live in colonies and most of the individual nesting colonies are on record.

Previously there had been no published record of yellow-billed magpies in the region of Yosemite National Park. On April 3, while driving on the main road from Hornitos to Mariposa, Mariposa county, several yellow-billed magpies were seen two miles east of Hornitos at an elevation of 1200 feet. On April 10, I returned to the vicinity with Ralph Anderson, government photographer for Yosemite National Park, to take pictures and gather more information on these birds.

The nests of this colony are located in white oaks, which grow abundantly over the rolling hills in this region. We examined 22 nests, most of which were located in the tops or near the ends of branches of the largest oaks in the vicinity. The nests are large globular structures, completely roofed over, having only a small entrance on one side. They are composed of sticks and lined with grass or roots. Some of the nests are three feet in diameter and one would expect them to be very conspicuous, but this is not always the case. These oaks are heavily infested with mistle-toe, which grows in large masses and from a distance it is not easy to distinguish between a mass of mistle-toe and a magpie's nest.

The food of the yellowbills consists of insects, seeds, grain and

carrion. During the fall of the year they consume quantities of grasshoppers.

THERE OVER 60 YEARS

Chriss Peterson, who owns a ranch upon which part of the colony nests, told us that he had been in the vicinity for 63 years and that this colony had been there at least that long. He estimates the number of magpies about his ranch at 200, and told us that he knew of no other nesting magpies in the region.

We saw about 25 of these birds in an area one-half mile long and one-fourth mile wide. It is hard to understand why so many magpies should be concentrated in this small area when so much of the surrounding country apparently presents exactly the same conditions.

On April 11, Clifford Pressall, junior park naturalist in Yosemite, and Charles Michael visited the colony. One magpie was seen to enter a nest and remain 10 minutes, when another magpie, supposedly the male, appeared with something in its beak. The male called several times and the female came out of the nest and followed the male from limb to limb, begging for food. During this process there was considerable talking and scolding by the pair. When the male finally did feed the female she fluttered her wings as a young bird does, and then returned to the nest, where she remained half an hour, when the observers departed.

Magpies, with their extremely long tails, are decidedly larger than any of our jays. Their coloration is conspicuously black and white. Their bills are bright yellow, which easily distinguishes them from the black-billed species east of the Sierra Nevada's.

Yellow-billed Magpies have been decreasing throughout the State,

due to settlement and persecution. It is encouraging to find this colony in such a thinly populated section. Here they should be able to live and multiply undisturbed.

FOOTHILL WILD FLOWERS

By M. E. BEATTY

Assistant Park Naturalist

Visitors in Yosemite valley during the early spring are constantly asking about the beautiful wild flower displays along the All Year highway between Merced and the park boundary. They are enchanted by the solid fields of whites, yellows, blues and purples and greatly appreciate learning at least the names of the more prominent of these colorful groups.

In order to be better posted on the many varieties of foothill flowers, a group of the museum staff with their families spent Sunday, April 3, in the vicinity of Mariposa, where a total of 65 different species were identified. Specimens were collected, pressed and mounted in Riker mounts for display in our museum flower room.

Among the many white flowers along the highway, the ones that furnished a more massive effect were meadow foam (*Limnathes douglasii*), popcorn flower (*Plagiobothrys nathae-fulvus*), woodland stars (*Tellima scabrella*) and five spot (*Nemophila maculata*). The dainty five spot just mentioned presents a solid white effect from a distance, although when close at hand the bluish spots on the ends of the petals are readily discernible.

YELLOW AND ORANGE

The yellows were represented by many varieties, but the commonest ones found along the roadside were

buttercups (*Ranunculus californicus*), goldfields (*Baeria chrysotoma*) and golden brodiaea (*Brodiaea ixoides*), while numbers of the sunflower family were seen at various places, but the above mentioned furnished the larger show. Classed with the yellows we might include two prominent orange or golden-colored flowers, the California poppy (*Eschscholtzia californica*) and fiddlenecks (*Amsinckia douglasiana*). Poppies were especially spread in great fields along the hills bordering the Merced river between Briceburg and El Portal.

The blues and purples were best represented by several varieties of lupine and brodiaea. One of the best loved of the blue group is the demure little baby blue eyes (*Nemophila menziesii*), while innocence and Chinese houses, of the collinsias, are favorites in the bluish purples.

As one nears the park boundary in the vicinity of El Portal several red flowers stand out in small restricted groups, the Indian paint brush (*Castilleja pinatorum*) and Indian pinks (*Silene californica*), while the strikingly beautiful magenta-colored red-bud or Judas tree (*Cercis occidentalis*), seems queen of them all.

PAGEANT OF THE MONTHS

The wild flowers in our foothills start blooming in March, while here in the Yosemite Valley they are several months later. One can enjoy wild flowers, at their maximum of bloom, for six months out of the year in the Sierra if he will follow the advance of spring from the foothills to the very crest of the range where alpine flowers are best in late August. There are 1200 different varieties of flowers in the Yosemite region, offering the flower lover a splendid opportunity for both study and recreation.



Digitized by
Yosemite Online Library

<http://www.yosemite.ca.us/library>

Dan Anderson