

# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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SKIING AT BADGER PASS

# Yosemite Nature Notes

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## RARE ADVENTURE

By Ranger-Naturalist Enid Michael

Rarity lends an interest to almost any sort of thing. In our years in Yosemite Valley Mr. Michael and I have many times been thrilled by meeting up with some bird, flower or animal valued for its scarceness. The wild and little known "Inner Chasm" of Tenaya Canyon was the scene of several adventures. It was here that we found the rare *Nartheicum californicum* in its southernmost haunts. *Nartheicum* is an iris-like plant that is topped with a raceme of dainty star-shaped yellow blossoms. In two sections of the Inner Chasm the drippy and almost sheer walls are hung with a drapery of *Nartheicum* and Five-fingered Ferns and in the blooming season this soft green drapery is spangled with myriad golden blossoms.

It was here too, below Gorge Fall, where the waters of the Tenaya drop into the Inner Chasm that we found the nesting home of the rare Black Swift. We were especially thrilled with the thought that only one other person had ever gazed on the nest of a Black Swift. It was a rare sight to see a parent swift come home and pump the one lone nest-

ling full of liquid food. This food must have been highly concentrated and rich in food value for the young bird was fed only once during the daylight hours.

Another adventure in the Inner Chasm was a rare storm, wildly rising waters and a narrow escape from the flood. Trapped in the gorge we found the almost sheer walls not easy to climb.

On one trip up the Tenaya we met "S.L.F.," the King of the Canyon, an exclusive nudist who has spent many summers in his hide-away above Gorge Falls.

*Calycosa*, the largest of all Sierra gentians, common in some of the more northern sections of the Sierra, but rare in the Yosemite district, we have found in some of our climbs on the walls of Yosemite Valley. One especially fine colony of this large-flowered gentian was found along the little stream that springs mysteriously from the base of the west face of Half Dome above Mirror Lake. So inaccessible is this colony of gentians that it will not often be seen by visitors to the valley. Perhaps it is just as well that *Calycosa*

is out of reach for beautiful flowers have a way of disappearing from the floor of the valley.

Mountain Lady's Slipper (*Cypripedium montanum*), a flower of rare beauty, was once common in certain sections of Yosemite Valley, but now it is practically gone. In a certain dark wood the last survivors make their stand. Each spring for many years we have gone to the secret wood to visit with this lovely orchid. There have been years when we found as many as six flowering plants, but often our reward has been but a single blossom.

Another plant that is so very particular about its choice of habitat is the little yellow-flowered *Viola Sheltoni*. We stumbled on this violet accidentally one early spring when we slid down the snow chute west of Taft Point on a shortcut to the valley floor. We were well down on the talus following a bear trail through the woods when we came upon the violet. The leaves of this violet were deeply cut and they spread out like many fingered hands. It is the peculiar leaf that differentiates this violet from the several other species of yellow violets found in the district.

*Dicentra puaciflora* is a rare and beautiful bleeding heart that we have found blooming along the Ledge Trail after a winter of heavy snows. Ivory - white, heart - shaped blossoms with a rich purple stripe down the center node from a bare stem which lifts six or eight inches above lovely fern-like foliage. Often the flower stalk bears two blossoms, occasionally only one.

It would be hard to say which is the most thrilling, to come on something one has long searched for, or to come unexpectedly upon some rarity. Perhaps the biggest thrill comes when one stumbles on the thing unexpectedly that one has long searched for.

Long had we searched and many miles had we covered in many sections of the park of no avail and then one day while following a Pileated Woodpecker through the woods at the upper end of the valley we came upon Pipsissewa, the object of our long search. At the foot of the talus slope in a mixed forest of oak and conifer and where leafmold lay thick among the boulders was a colony of plants with bright green foliage forming mats over the brown pine needles. It was early in the month of June and from slender stems pearl-pink, saucer-shaped blossoms hung like bells. Through the years this colony of Pipsissewa that hides away in the wood has prospered unseen by the thousands that come each year to the valley.

The rattlesnake is always thrilling, mostly I suppose on account of its evil reputation, but also in the Yosemite Valley in recent years it has become thrilling because of its scarcity. I remember once when climbing a cliff on the north side of the valley I put my hand on a coiled rattlesnake and I found the cold feel of its body quite thrilling.

Thrills that came to us in the open spaces above timberline were the sight of a Wolverine wandering leisurely across a frozen snow field,

a Cony cutting and storing hay, a Pine Marten carrying off a Cony and Rosy Finches and an Ouzel feeding together on a frozen snow bank.

### STAR GAZING IN THE DAYTIME

By Ranger-Naturalist Harold E. Perry

One of the many reminders one should carry with him in the mountains is the fact that, under certain conditions, the planet Venus is visible in the daytime. A first requirement for visibility is that the location of this planet shall be several degrees before or behind the sun. At the times when Venus is changing from a morning to an evening planet, or vice versa, it approaches the sun too closely to be seen.

A second requirement is a brilliantly clear atmosphere. For this reason, Yosemite offers splendid possibilities for seeing Venus at midday. The clarity of the High Sierra atmosphere is marked.

Having met the foregoing conditions and knowing approximately how far before or behind the sun to make the search, one next should find a bit of dense shade as a protection to his eyes and begin to seek out his quarry. A fair degree of patience is required. One's eyesight must be adjusted to the conditions of a brilliant sky, but if one continues to search in the right place, he is finally rewarded with the coveted discovery. Under favorable condi-

tions, Venus looks very much like a drop of quicksilver in the sky and when once found, the discoverer wonders how he missed seeing it so long.

Frequently persons of a skeptical turn of mind join the search rather half heartedly, being somewhat suspicious that a practical joke is being perpetrated, but once the search is rewarded, the most skeptical usually becomes the greatest enthusiast in pointing out his find to others.

So one should remember that Venus is visible in the daytime under favorable conditions, and on his next visit to the mountains he can renew the thrill of discovery for himself and share it with others.

### NATURE NOTELETS

By Ranger Arthur Holmes

"Man Bites Dog" found its equivalent headline in a report received Saturday May 7, 1938 to the effect: "Deer Chases Coyote".

Shortly after coming on duty at the Rangers' Office a visitor came in and excitedly reported eight deer "ganging-up" on a coyote and running him "out of the country." The event occurred between the twin bridges by The Ahwahnee on the Mirror Lake road about 5 p.m., and the deer, not content with merely chasing the coyote away, were attempting to surround and trap him.



### FIRE FALL FROM MIRROR LAKE

By Ranger-Naturalist Harold E. Perry

Every year thousands of people enjoy the firefall in Yosemite Valley. Each evening at nine o'clock, almost the entire valley population is out with upturned eyes to gaze enraptured at an unusual fire effect which never grows old. Few there are who would intentionally miss this display even *one night during their summer visit.*

If a study were made as to the various locations from which people view the firefall, unquestionably Camp Curry would stand at the head of a list arranged in order of popularity. It is natural that such should be the case for the Camp Curry program attracts a greater number of people than any other, and the firefall is tied in so closely with that program.

There are a few persons however who would be more interested in the locations noted at the lower extreme of the above mentioned list, for they are the ones who find greater satisfaction in being more nearly alone on such stimulating occasions. To them the presence of a large number of people often detracts from the spiritual quality of their enjoyment.

It is to such that these words are directed for Mirror Lake offers unique advantages as a point from which to view the firefall, and yet very few people are aware of this fact.



In the early evening, select a spot on the delta along the eastern edge of the lake. Be sure that the fire which is visible as it burns on Gla-

Glacier Point is also visible in the watery reflection at your feet. It is a perfect reflection for the day winds have gone to rest and in their absence the stars of heaven appear in the quiet pool before you. It is really unnecessary to go as far as the Mirror Lake delta for such a vantage point. The small body of water just below the dam also has interesting possibilities, although its mirror is not so highly polished for the current of water through that pool is likely to cause the surface to be somewhat restless.

After you have found a place to your liking, you will be satisfied to sit and listen to the night sounds about you. They are a part of nature and add to your feeling of at-onement with the out-of-doors. Time, though not consciously measured, speeds rapidly for you and before long the silence of the night is invaded by the calls from Glacier Point announcing firefall. As the last call fades into the distance, a ball of brilliant fire is born on the rim of the valley above Camp Curry and gradually a cataract of blazing sparks hangs down the granite wall, the sight of which stirs something

deep within you, something which has long been buried with worn out superstitions of an ancient day.

It is an especially long firefall, the one you witness from Mirror Lake. The intercepting ledge of rock slants in your direction and allows you to see a greater length of fall. However, the advantage of your position is not so much the added length of the fiery cataract as it is the mirrored reflection of fire at your feet. A double spectacle presents itself and your attention is divided between falling and rising fire.

As the last trace of brilliance hangs motionless against the cliff, to be consumed gradually by the blackness of the night, you find yourself alone once more with the stars mirrored at your feet and with the silence of evening broken only by the sound of squeaking bats and singing insects. The lights of the Glacier Point Hotel finally arouse you from your reverie to remind you of camp responsibilities, and as you unhurriedly return to the more thickly populated areas of the valley, you mentally note in your diary of memory that the evening has been a success.

## AN EAGLE'S NEST ON MT. HOFFMANN

By W. G. Heil, Ranger Naturalist

A very interesting climax for some of the members of my seven day hiking party was the discovery of an eagle's nest on Mt. Hoffmann. Moreover, it appeared to be an active nest, which is unusual for such a

late date.

While the party was on top of Mt. Hoffmann, shortly after 4:30 p.m. on August 20, the shrill "chee-ing" of young eagles was heard. The cries seemed to be coming from the can-

yon below, on the north side of the mountain. Careful examination of the region below disclosed what appeared to be a large nest on top of a spur of rock about an eighth of a mile away. This spur of rock was set off from the cliffs or crags which extend in series down the slope of the mountains towards the west. It was about opposite the fourth crag from the top of the mountain and slightly below it. Although the distance was considerable, it was possible to make out the nest and to see what was apparently a large Golden Eagle at the edge of the nest.

The shrill cries of the young eagles (or young eagle) continued for about ten minutes, during which time we watched the nest continually. We were rewarded by seeing a large bird drop straight down from the nest into the canyon below. After this bird had left the nest the "cheering" or crying of the young birds (or bird) ceased.

Apparently, from these observations, this was a nest of the Golden Eagle (*Aquila chrysaetos* Linnaeus) still active on August 20, 1938. Wetmore, in his article "The Eagles, Hawks and Vultures" included in *The Book of Birds* (published by the National Geographic Society) states that "Nesting begins at the end of February and continues until May or June" and "Incubation is believed to last about four weeks and the young leave the nest in two months or a little more." This would mean that — if this nest were active as it appeared to be — nesting must not

have begun much before the beginning of May. This is perhaps a month or two months later than is to be expected in this locality.

The fact that the season in the Yosemite has been extremely late, as shown by the late nestings of other species of birds, may account for finding this nest active at this date.

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### BIG TREES IN DENMARK

By Ranger Naturalist Arthur Carthew

An interesting bit of history pertaining to the Big Tree (*Sequoia gigantea*) was told me this past summer while on duty at the Mariposa Grove Museum by a visitor from Denmark. About 1925 the Danish magazine *FREM*, devoted largely to travel and science, made an effort to increase its circulation following a modernization move. As an inducement to subscribe, a package of seeds from cones of California's big trees (presumably *Sequoia gigantea*) was given with each two-year subscription. In keeping with the offer the first issue of the new magazine featured the Grizzly Giant on the cover. The gentleman who gave this information reported that they had no success in germinating the seeds in the nursery in which he was employed in Copenhagen and he doubted if any of the subscribers were more successful. Even though this episode was not a success it serves to illustrate the world-wide fame of California's Big Trees.

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## A STRANGE COINCIDENCE

By Charles Michael

After five years absence from the Yosemite Selma Werner came back for a visit. Selma is very much interested in birds and five years ago when her visit to the valley was drawing to a close she came to me with a request that I show her an Evening Grosbeak. The nesting season was over and most of the Evening Grosbeaks had gone for a jaunt in the high country above the rim of the valley; however, I promised to do my best. I did not expect much luck, but strange to say we had not walked more than a quarter of a mile when a pair of Evening Grosbeaks came squealing along and alighted on a branch not more than fifteen feet above our heads. Soon the birds dropped down to a Rhamnus bush and began eating berries. We had a fine visit with them and Selma was very much pleased.

When Selma came into the valley this year the first thing she said was,



"I want to see an Evening Grosbeak. I have had no good look at an Evening Grosbeak for five years." She

also expressed a desire to see a Pileated Woodpecker. The result of our little talk was that we made a date to go "birding" the following morning. Leaving Camp Curry, our first stop was made at the Happy Isles swamp. No sooner had we opened the car door than there were the Evening Grosbeaks, one on the ground and one perched on a branch above our heads. Why were the grosbeaks here? I had never seen them here before and I was not expecting them. It is a strange happenstance like this that helps me to believe in the Fairies.

It was here in the alder grove in the swamp that I hoped to find the "Big Woodpecker." We spent half an hour or so in the neighborhood, added a number of birds to the morning bird list, but did not see nor hear the Pileated.

Our next stop was at Mirror Lake. We sat down on the shore where we had a wide view and waited for something to happen. A flock of Band-tailed Pigeons flew overhead, two Spotted Sandpipers teetered along the shore, Violet-green Swallows hawked over the lake, occasionally dipping low to strike the surface and send ripples across the face of the mirror. Then came a lone Ouzel to forage along the shore—all new birds for the list, but still no word from the big woodpecker.

We had left the lake and were walking along toward the car when from close at hand came a loud



shouted rolling call which announced the Pileated Woodpecker in no uncertain terms.

The call of the Pileated is much like the call of the Red-shafted Flicker, but much louder and more thrilling. One might mistake the call of a flicker for that of a Pileated Woodpecker, but one would never mistake the call of the Pileated for that of the flicker. There is something weird and startling about the "Big Fellow's" call.

Selma says the call of the Pileated Woodpecker always gives her a strange feeling in the pit of the stomach. I told her to remember that strange stomach-feeling and she would never again confuse the calls of the two birds. And really this is no joke; there is something in the call of a Pileated Woodpecker that stirs the insides of a bird student.

### THE CURIOUS DEER

By Ranger-Naturalist Arthur Carthew

The deer, like most other animals, are very curious and by taking advantage of this trait one is frequently able to study them at close range. On a recent walk through the forest near the Mariposa Grove Museum I chanced upon a doe mule deer. On sighting her I immediately stopped and remained perfectly still. She moved away a short distance and then began to approach me in a circle, curious to see what manner of thing I was. Finally she came to within twenty-five feet of me before I moved. On realizing that she had

been fooled and that I was a mere human she gave several loud snorts as though angry at both me and herself and then bounded away in the woods. Actually a deer is more frightened by sound than movement and one could even move slightly without arousing the suspicion of the animal provided that care were taken not to make a noise.

### PACIFIC NIGHT HAWKS AT SIERRA CREST

By George Osborn Hale,  
Field School '38

After Field School was over two friends and I went on a hike south of Tuolumne Meadows. We journeyed up Lyell Canyon, over Donahue Pass to Thousand Island Lake and then came north along the east slope of the Sierra and crossed the divide at Parker and Mono Passes. Our trip took us to the summits of Mt. Maclure, Mt. Lyell, Parker Peak, Koip Peak and Kuna Peak. The view from any one of these peaks is grand, but from Koip Peak one can see the most. The view is positively awe inspiring. I have gazed upon few such scenes.

As we descended from Koip's summit to the headwaters of Parker Creek we saw an even dozen Pacific Night Hawks circling up and out of the canyon. We paused to watch their flight. Their narrow and powerful wings aided by up-draughts of air took them quickly up and over the 12,500-foot ridge running from Koip to Parker Peak.



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Dan Anderson