YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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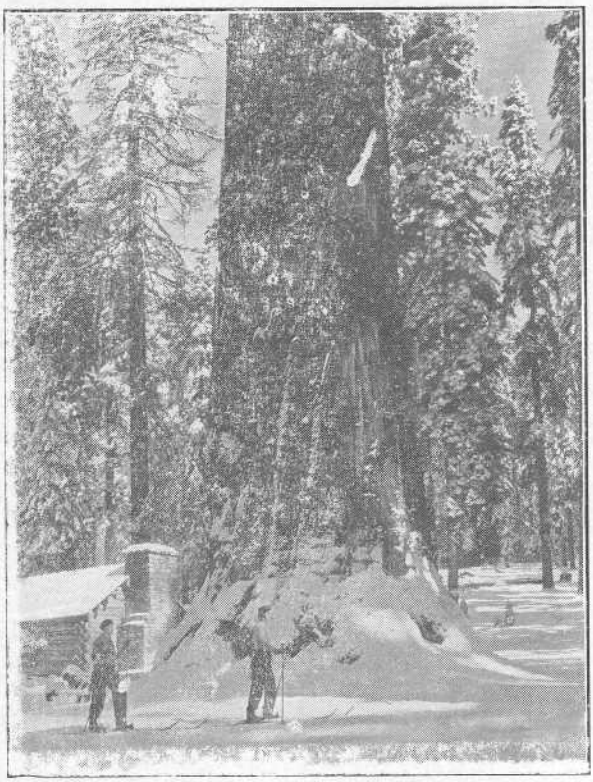

Yosemite Nature Notes

THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF
THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DEPARTMENT
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GREETINGS FROM YOSEMITE

By Elizabeth H. Godfrey, NPS Staff

The snow's an artist slight of hand
For with one master stroke—
It transforms all the shrubs and trees
Into a realm of fairy folk.

The cedar trees with branches laden
Are regal queens in grand array;
The mighty oaks—a cloud in Heaven—
The dogwood, nymphs of the ballet.

A hundred dozen Christmas cards
Of gorgeous winter scenery
Are scattered on the Valley Floor
With touch of forest greenery.

We'd like so much to send them out—
Although in sun they're fleeting—
To lovers of Yosemite
With hearty Yuletide greeting.

NATURE SENSE IN YOSEMITE

By Lloyd P. Parratt, Park Ranger—Summer 1944

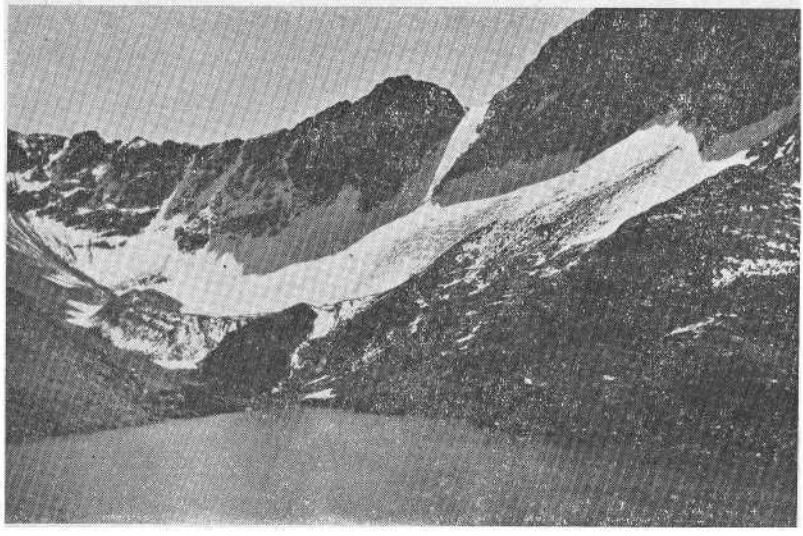
It is one thing to be vaguely aware of a bird's presence and quite another thing to be really conscious of the color, song, or call note of the bird. To enjoy nature we must use our five senses to the fullest extent.

Sense is a feeling of consciousness somewhat less objective than sensation and hence either esthetic or emotional. Briefly, the five senses and some meaningful synonyms of them are sight (beauty), hearing (sounds and tones), smell (fragrance or aroma), taste (flavor or tang), and touch (feeling).

Beauty is its own excuse for being. I like to see a blue gem of a lake nestled in a granite bowl framed by snow-capped mountain peaks with a canopy of blue sky adorned with billowy white clouds.

It is interesting to observe the form, shade of green of the foliage, and leaf pattern of each tree and shrub. Trees, like people, must be met often in order to know them, and its fun to know the trees. The graceful pattern of the foliage and the symmetry of form of the Mountain Hemlock place this tree high on the list of beautiful trees in Yosemite.

Along the roads in early summer many visitors enjoy the feathery white or blue blossoms of the Ceanothus and the bright orange of the Western Wallflower or Plains Erysimum. Along the trails one may enjoy the red of the Indian Paint Brush or of the Snow Plant; the yellow of the Golden Brodiaea and the Sulphur Flower, the blue of the Larkspur and the Sierra Forget-me-not;



the white of the Mountain Misery, and the White Heather.

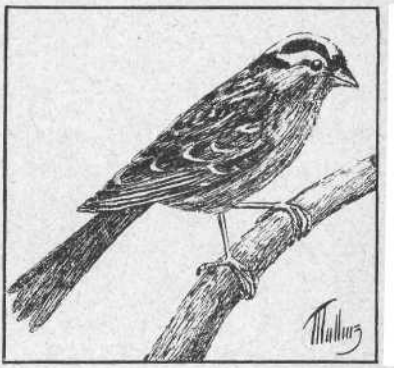
Birds combine color with motion and provide flashes of typical colors for each bird. The crimson, yellow

and black of the Western Tanager; the clown-like pattern of red, black and white of the California Woodpecker, and the blue and black of the Blue-fronted Stellar Jay are common to most Yosemite visitors. Be sure to enjoy the azure blue of the Mt. Bluebird which rivals the intensity of the blue sky above, and the pinkish wash of the Rosy Finch against the white of glacial ice and snow.

Mammals are perhaps not so colorful as birds and are not so frequently observed in the daytime. But Yosemite friends are familiar with the colorful pattern of the Golden Mantled Ground Squirrel, and the salt and pepper gray of the long-legged Gray Squirrel. All visitors like to see any one of the color phases of the American Black Bear—black, brown, or cinnamon. The protective coloration may be noticed in the seasonal colors of the Mule Deer—the "red" or reddish-brown of summer and the "blue" or grayish-brown of winter. Take the trail to see the Yellow-haired Porcupine and the Sierra Marmot. The Cony is not so colorful but has the most interesting habit of "making hay while the sun shines" high up on rocky slopes.

Among the reptiles the Coral King Snake is conspicuous with its alternating color bands or red, yellow, and black. To the fisherman nothing is as beautiful as the lateral color stripe of the Rainbow Trout or the white-edged lower fins of the Eastern Brook.

I like to listen to the murmuring of the wind in the trees and the babbling of the water as it sings its way from icy peaks to the great ocean. The songs of birds have been aptly characterized as the symphony of nature. Hikers will recall the plaintive call of the Chickadee, the sweet



song of the White-crowned Sparrow, the raucous call of the Clark's Nutcracker, and the hollow booming note of the Sierra Grouse.

Sunrises and sunsets are truly magnificent as viewed from Glacier Point, May Lake, Clouds' Rest, Half Dome, and hundreds of more remote vantage places. Beautiful sunrises

and sunsets strengthen my belief in the quotation, "A thing of beauty is a joy forever."

Naturally, we all enjoy the steep gray granite walls and the spouting plumes of frothy water of the water-

falls so typical of Yosemite. Every waterfall has different characteristics and there are many falls waiting your discovery. The thunderous roar and the mighty volume of a waterfall have a peculiar fascination for me. Nevada Fall is my favorite waterfall in this respect, but there are countless other falls and cascades, each with its own characteristic beauty.

After spending some hours on a hot trail it is difficult to describe the refreshing joy of sipping the sweet fresh water from snow-fed streams. The cool taste of pure snow in the mountains is also very satisfying. Coffee, bacon and eggs cooked over a pine-scented fire taste particularly good to campers after a night in a sleeping bag.

The atmosphere of pine trees is particularly alluring on getting into the mountains after a winter's absence. Be sure to enjoy the honeysuckle-like fragrance of the Western Azalea nourished by the freshness of snow-water, notice the pervading

sweetness of a large stand of lupine, which is not evident on individual or small groups of plants. I like best of all the intangible yet bracing freshness of the morning air, and the cool sweet smell of evening.

Any Yosemite trail which leads to an elevation of about 10,000 feet will provide nearly the whole gamut of beauty, sounds, frangances, flavors, and feelings of Nature in Yosemite.

YOSEMITE ANIMALS

CHICKAREE BLITZ

By Helen K. Sharsmith

The Douglas tree squirrel, or Sierra Nevada chickaree as he is also called, has always seemed to me the most impertinent, the most active, the most human, and by all odds the most lovable of our Yosemite animals. This amazingly agile little creature is a familiar sight and sound to all the campers of Yosemite. He has been incomparably characterized by John Muir in the "Mountains of California." Muir calls him the "master forester" of the Sierra because of his activity in cutting for their seeds the green cones of all the cone bearing trees. Many of the seeds later germinate at forgotten caches. The chickaree scales the smaller cones (hemlock, Douglas fir, etc.) on the limb where the cone is cut, but he cuts and drops to the ground the larger cones (ponderosa, Jeffrey, and sugar pine), then descends and either scales the cones for immediate consumption of the seeds, or else drags the cones off to some nook or hollow log to be cached for the winter.

Last summer while camped in a government tent beneath ponderosa pines in Yosemite Valley, my affection for these diminutive dynamos was sorely tried. The ponderosa pine directly in front of the only entrance to our tent was the domain of

one vigorous chickaree. We were delighted during our first days in camp to share our territory with him; and we thoroughly enjoyed his antics. The fourth day in camp, however, a heavy green pine cone fell almost into my lap. We laughed at that first cone, but thereafter during our two months in camp our chickaree neighbor subjected us to a bombardment of pine cones which in-

creased in intensity as autumn approached. At first his cones dropped only intermittently, but as the chickaree's zest for harvesting increased, the cones fell more and more frequently. His favorite tree, the one directly in front of the entrance to our tent, had a seemingly inexhaustible supply of cones. The cones of this tree were as large as Jeffrey pine cones, being in the green state about seven to eight inches long and weighing two to three pounds. Covered as they were with heavy prickles, and dropping about 100 feet, they were formidable missiles. I shudder to think what would have happened if one had hit our tiny daughter, and I didn't relish the thought of getting one on my own head. As it was, the chickaree scored several narrow misses and one scratch on the various members of the family.

The last week of August the chickaree's harvesting reached such a crescendo that our nerves were badly frayed. No longer did he come to the ground and dismember each cone as he dropped it. Instead he would cut off several, then descend to pull them away intact to a hole under a nearby log. The first plunk would waken us about 6:30 a.m., and then the plunks would follow each other in rapid succession. Fortunately he did not keep this up all day. About 11 a.m. he seemed to feel the need for relaxation, and the plunk-plunks would cease. For the three or more hours of his harvesting activity, however, we could not let the children out the entrance of our tent. We climbed out the back side, or stayed safely within. I tried discouraging the chickaree by picking up the cones before he could retrieve them. One morning in two hours I picked up twenty-seven within a twenty foot radius of our tent entrance. The next morning I picked up thirty-four more! The chickaree only seemed to work the harder, so I gave up. Finally, just when we had decided that moving to another tent would be the better part of valor, the bombardment ceased. The chickaree had cut the last cone from his favorite tree. He moved on, just without range of our camp, and our chickaree blitz was over.

THREE IS A CROWD

By Dorothy Welch, N.P.S. Staff

While rounding a curve on the Glacier Point Road, near the El Portal viewpoint (Sept. 25, 1944), we were startled by the sight of three wildcats "jaywalking" across the highway. As we approached all three animals dashed to the roadside. Two quickly disappeared in the nearby timber but the third, its curiosity apparently sufficient to overcome its natural caution, remained in sight. It paced back and forth in front of the slowly approaching car, alternately watching the wheels and the occupants of the car who were equally interested in this rather unusual and unexpected sight. It showed no sign of fear and remained by the side of the road as the car passed within a few feet.

AN ADOPTED GROSBEAK

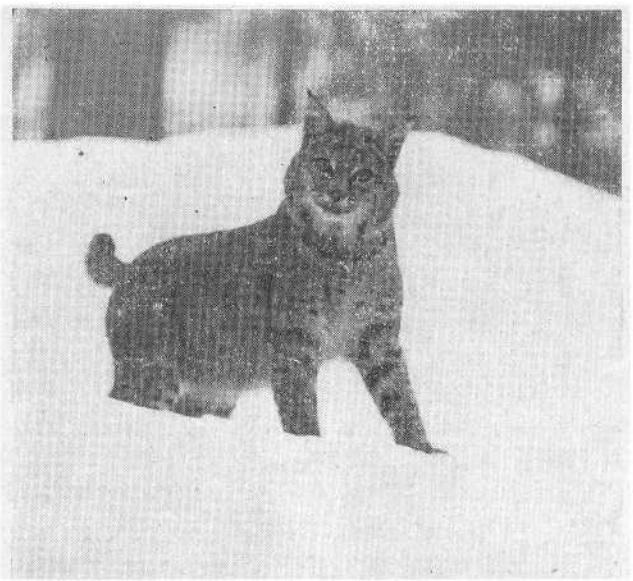
By C. Frank Brockman, Park Naturalist

A young black-headed grosbeak, retrieved from the wreckage of a nest last June, was the source of considerable interest during the past summer. During the first days it was carefully fed on warm milk administered with an eye dropper. Later bread soaked in warm milk was its principal repast. It soon learned to gobble this greedily and by mid-August it had advanced to a point where it fed naturally and without assistance upon seeds.

An expansive cage, which served as its home, gave it ample opportunity to test its wings in preliminary flight, but these first "solos" were soon extended to longer hops indoors about the room at regular intervals. Always after such excursions it returned voluntarily to its perch within the cage.

Throughout most of the summer it required regular and constant attention. Picnics on the bank of the Merced River were complicated by this problem for the bird also had to be transported so that it could be fed regularly. Park visitors were often bewildered — then amused — at the sight of a family with a large bird cage as part of the picnic equipage.

Shortly before September 1st the cage was placed outdoors and "Penny"—for by this time it had acquired a name—was released. But



apparently it had developed an attachment for its adopted home as that evening it returned and took up its usual place within the cage. Each morning it was released and each evening it returned. On one occasion when the normally clear Yosemite skies were darkened by a sudden shower "Penny" appeared hastily out of nowhere and sought sanctuary from the disturbance.

On only a few occasions did it vary its routine of leaving in the morning and returning before nightfall so, as summer waned and September passed, it appeared as though we had been adopted. Museum records indicated that October 9th was the latest date upon which black-headed grosbeaks had been noted in the Valley. However, on the evening of October 2nd "Penny" failed to return and after a few days we decided that our summer visitor had at last undertaken a southern journey in anticipation of approaching winter. Since the bird was banded we shall look forward to next spring in the hope that it will return to Yosemite.

YOSEMITE — TYPE LOCALITY FOR AMPHIBIANS AND REPTILES

By Myrl V. Walker, Asso. Park Naturalist

There are probably very few areas in the United States of size comparable to the Yosemite National Park that have served as the type locality for so many species of amphibians and reptiles. A review of the literature reveals that this area is so characterized for five species — two salamanders, one toad, and two lizards.

On first thought one might think that this had resulted from intensive collecting in a restricted area due to the fact that the park and its scenic attractions brought many scientists to this region in the early days of taxonomic research. But when we realize that two of the species were discovered within the last twenty-five years, and that two others were given specific status only within the past ten years, we are led to believe that the Yosemite region is a biotic province or island of more than passing significance.

Perhaps some of the same conditions and forces that brought about the isolation of the giant sequoia along the west slope of the Sierra Nevada, during and following the Pleistocene period, were also responsible for the divergent forms of amphibians and reptiles now found here.

The two species of salamanders are Ensatina sierrae Storer, the Sierra Nevada salamander, and Hydromantes platycephalus (Camp), the Mt. Lyell salamander. The toad is Bufo canorus Camp, or the Yosemite toad. Within the lizard group we find Eumeces gilberti gilberti (Van Denburgh), the Yosemite skink, and Sceloporus occidentalis taylori Camp, the Tenaya blue-bellied lizard.