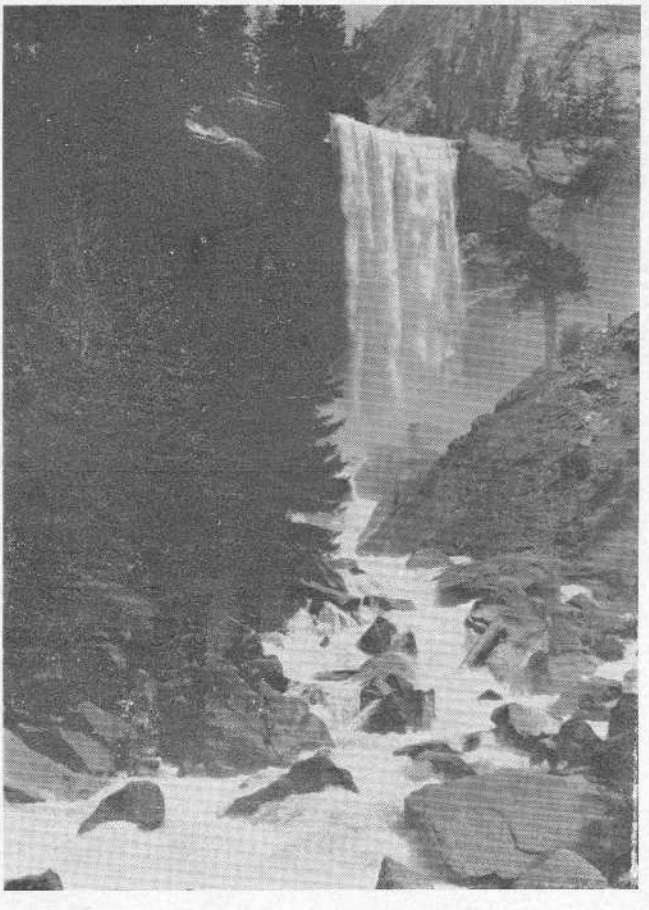
YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

Vol. XXIV June, 1945 No. 6



Vernal Fall

Yosemite Nature Notes

THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF
THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DEPARTMENT
AND THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCITAION

F. A. Kittredge, Superintendent — C. F. Brockman, Park Naturalist

M. V. Walker, Associate Park Naturalist

VOL. XXIV — JUNE, 1945 — NO.6

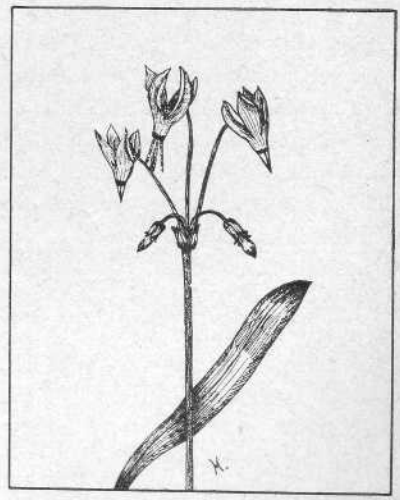
FOLLOWING THE FOOT STEPS OF THE SNOW

By Enid R. Michael

By the end of June in Yosemite it is difficult to ignore the call of the cool, sequestered peace of the high mountains. Usually by that time the Tioga Road is open and, although snow patches will be found in abundance in some localities other areas will be highlighted by the first flowers of the upper elevations. And so we anticipated our journey in the light of the many interests and beauties that we expected to find along the early summer trails of the Tuolumne Meadows area.

On the lower reaches of the Big Oak Flat Road the broadleaf lupine was magnificent. Above the road in two places the bank was gay with valiant patches of goldeardrops bleedingheart (Dicentra chrysantha). The next floral display was at Crane Flat where Jeffrey shootingstar, common camas and American bistort (Polygonum bistortoides) made a delightful floral pattern. In sharp contrast no hint of life yet appeared a step higher in Gin Flat meadow.

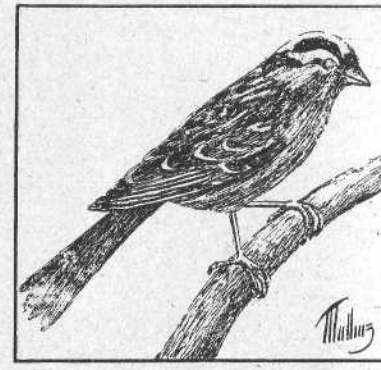
As we went higher patches of snow appeared along the road. The snow increased until at White Wolf the whole meadow was covered. About five feet in depth, it presented a strange aspect for one could see under it where black water violently churned about as though trying to escape. Only the upper crust remained firm. This wild commotion, I reflected, is all in the making of a high mountain meadow, inasmuch as, in a month, the whole scene would be smoothed over with a gay mantle of soft wild bloom.



Further along on sunny slopes the snow had disappeared and great clumps of intensely blue Lappu'a nervosa flashed into bloom, standing in the sunlight against the shadow of the red fir forest.

Again deep snow drifts were found along the way. What a relief, a little later, to reach Tuolumne Meadows to find them free of snow. White violets on short stems were hastening into bloom and great beds of fragrant shooting stars were opening out. Along the sky line Unicorn, Cathedral and all the other charming peaks and pinnacles were still festooned with snow.

The following morning we arose with the birds to indulge our fondness for spring bird music. The early morning concert was just beginning as we stepped out into the cool dawn. Cassin purple finches with strawberry colored heads were among the best singers. Their sweet rippling song reminds one of the music of the house finch. We heard also, the song of the white-crowned sparrow. It started off with two dreamy, long-drawn notes, but at this season it is pepped up to a volume difficult to recognize. A pair of these dapper birds with breast so modestly gray and streaked crown of white had their nest in a lodgepole pine in front of the Sierra Club Parsons Lodge. A pair of sweet voiced mountain blue birds were busy inspecting an old woodpecker cavity in the trunk of a dead lodgepole pine not far away. The male blue bird has borrowed his color from the sky and as he sits in the sunshine words cannot describe his beauty. Meantime rubycrowned kinglets sang their songs over and over.



White - crowned sparrow

After breakfast we packed our knapsacks with lunch and cameras and took the trail down the canyon with Waterwheel Falls on the Tuolumne River our goal.

The wild flowers, a border of gay spring beauties along the trail, claimed our attention almost at once. There were little bouquets of blue violets here and there, the Nevada lewisia (Lewisia nevadensis), a white star in the short grass, along with pink faced threeleaf lewisia (Lewisia triphylla), beds of the papery balls of the threebract onion (Allium tribracteatum), and Douglas phlox cuddled about the boulders and followed with loving garlands every crack and cranny. Mountain gooseberry with tan colored, saucer-shaped flowers also added its bit to the floral gayety.

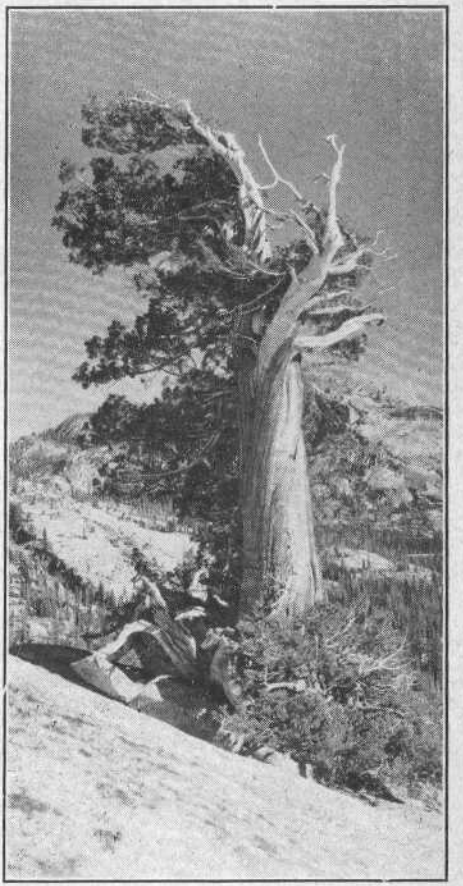
We were not surprised to find the water in the streams and rivers high. Our trail crossed three large streams, one after another, but with the aid of logs and stepping stones we crossed each without much difficulty. It seemed to us that we had been walking for some time and as yet had not really left the Tuolumne Meadows. After crossing the last stream, though, the trail begins to descend sharply and we felt that now we were really on our way.

We crossed the Tuolumne River on a foot bridge. For a time, the trail is close to the stream which here descends through a series of wonderful cascades visible from the trail in all their glory.

Again near Glen Aulin we crossed the river and were forced to climb up the bluff to avoid the water in the trail. Growing in the cracks of the bluff were the attractive orange flowers of Brodiaea gracilis. The more common Brodiaea ixioides we had seen along the trail. Back to the trail again we noted that Alkali Creek was so high that anyone crossing to the site of the Glen Aulin High Sierra Camp would have to swim.

The path through the vale of Glen Aulin was one long to remember. White-barked aspens cast their cool shade and tall Lappula nervosa bordered the trail with sweet, forget-me-not like flowers.

Soon after leaving Glen Aulin we found ourselves on the water-wheel slope. Here we rested, sitting on a ledge close to the cascading Tuolumne River. The sky overhead was deep blue with stately white clouds. Perched on a ledge not far away



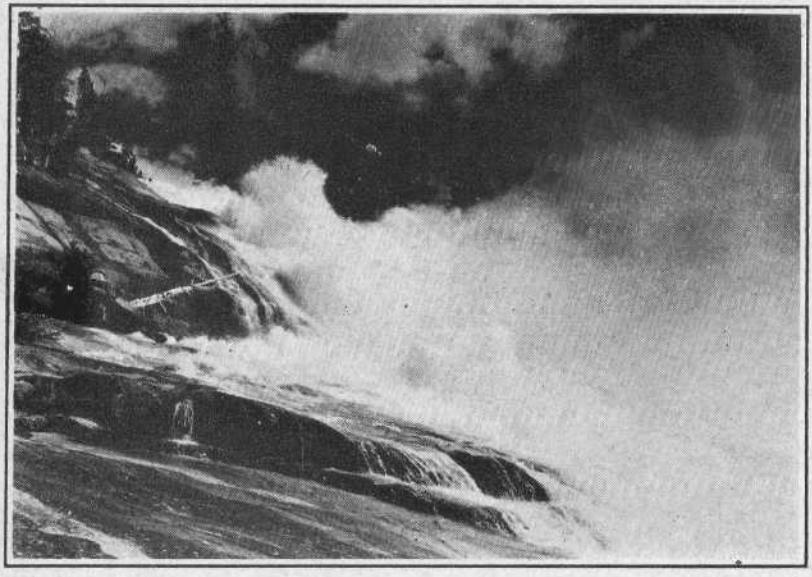
was a handsome Sierra juniper and across the river, up a steep draw, were graceful mountain hemlocks.

The young trees gave us the impression of old fashioned girls with long flounced skirts, and the heads

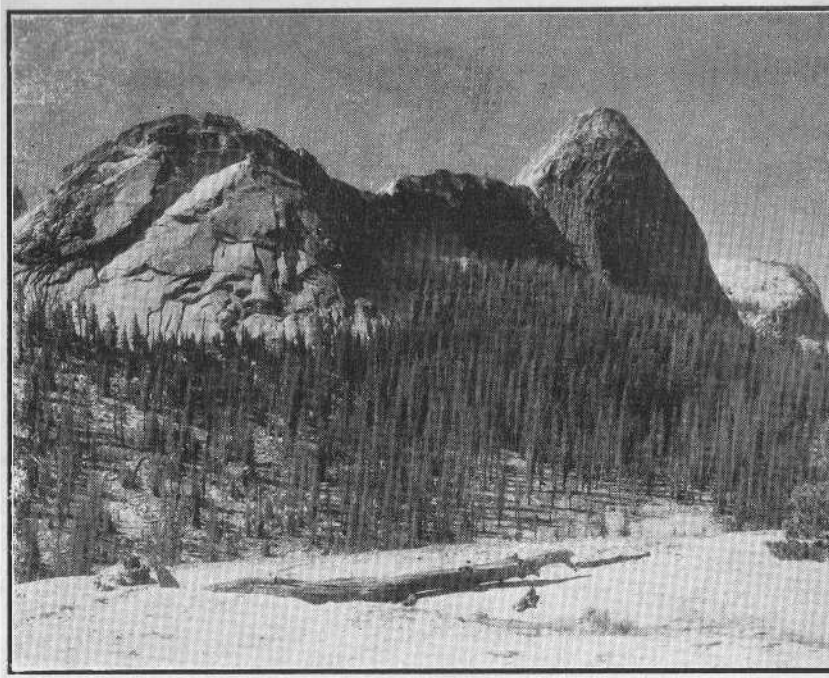
and shoulders of the older trees seemed draped with mantillas, so lace-like is the hemlock foliage.

Our communion with the cool, strong spirit of the stream was refreshing and with renewed strength we gathered our belongings together and continued on. Down, down went the trail and down, down went we. At length a short side trail brought us to a point beside Waterwheel Falls. Here the Tuolumne River cascades down a steep slide and midway of the cascade leap the "wheels." On the slide directly in front of us were two perfect ones about forty feet high. They appeared to good advantage as one "wheel" was slightly forward of the other. In the foreground black rocks and a dark tree emphasized the white purity of the wheeling waters. Further up the cascades were two more of larger size but because of a great flare of mist these were not so definite in outline. Spoon shaped projections in the bed of the cascade occasion this unusual phenomenon. The falling water strikes the projection and seems to curl backward into a perfect waterwheel. This cascade presents a picture of happy, dancing waters that is at its best when the Tuolumne River is high.

Delightful as this spectacle was we felt that more was to come inasmuch as further down the river we had glimpsed a great arm of mist flung up from the river gorge. Hopefully then, we continued on and, after a



Waterwheel Falls



Fairview Dome

half mile, we found the monster waterwheel, a perfect one that to my widened eyes seemed to leap at least a hundred feet. After a visit with this last marvel we turned reluctant steps up the canyon for the hour was late and we were far from home.

As we started back we reflected that we had probably dropped three thousand feet and that it was nine miles to the Soda Springs at Tuolumne Meadows. Darkness would be coming on, there was a marsh to traverse and many streams to cross. From time to time I glanced back with apprehension at the sun but to my relief the sun seemed to remain in the same place—high above the horizon.

At length the last stream was crossed and we stepped into the shadow of the forest. Even here the sun followed with blood-red rays painting the rocks and trees, and although it was 8:30 when we finally stepped into the shadowy interior of Parsons Lodge, daylight still held outdoors.

YOSEMITE ANIMALS

NOTES ON THE VARIED THRUSH

By Myrl V. Walker, Associate Park Naturalist

For several days just prior to October 17, a clear, high-pitched bird call had attracted my attention, and I had tried in vain to locate the bird. The call was unmistakable, for such is the call of the varied thrush. On the morning of October 17, as I opened the back door of the museum that leads to the Wildflower Garden, I was suddenly startled by the noisy thrashing of a bird trying to escape from the low bushes around the feeding tray. The bird flew only a few feet and then perched in plain sight on a branch of an alder tree. It was at once recognized as the varied thrush.

Although this bird is nearly the same size as the common robin, and with somewhat similar markings, its habits are decidedly different. Their color markings, like their call, are unmistakable, and the dark band across the breast is in sharp contrast to the rich color which forms its border. In the Field Guide to Western Birds by Peterson we find the following description: "Similar to Robin but with an orange eye-stripe, orange wing-bars, and a black band across the rusty breast. Female:—Breast-band gray. Immature:—Breast-band imperfect or speckled with orange; under parts speckled with dusty. The rusty wing-bars and eye-stripe and shorter tail distinguish them from young Robins."

The varied thrushes are for the most part quite elusive and are seldom observed. In the northern portion of the United States, which is their summer range, they are seldom seen except during the spring and fall migration. In their winter range they are seen only during periods of very inclement weather. Their movements are always quick, and when on the ground in thick brush they often seem startled and bewildered when they first sense the approach

of the observer. When feeding on the ground, they hop around in a very nervous manner, and the way they literally attack the leaves, hop back quickly, and then dive in again, is one of their most distinctive characteristics.

Shortly after the first of November there were several days of stormy weather. It was cloudy and rainy, and to my great surprise, varied thrushes began to arrive in considerable numbers and were observed in various localities in Yosemite Valley. On several different days during this rainy period as many as 25 to 30 of these birds could be counted in the Wildflower Garden back of the Museum. A few days of very clear weather followed but the varied thrushes were seldom seen, apparently keeping well back in the moist underbrush of the canyons and the rim country.

Another rainy and cloudy period about the first of December again brought out varied thrushes in numbers fully as great as observed before. This seemed rather interesting, for during the clear days few were to be seen, but every stormy, cloudy, and especially rainy period seemed to bring them to the Valley floor in considerable numbers. This "hide and seek" game was repeated several times during the next few weeks, but on January 20, during another stormy and rainy period, flocks of from 40 to 50 varied thrushes were observed in the Wildflower Garden on several occasions. This seemed to mark the height of their concentration in the Valley, although each storm brought them out conspicuously, even up to the middle of April.

The large number of varied thrushes observed seemed to be a rather unusual occurence, for I had never before seen them in such a concentrated migration. But as soon as I started checking back through the old records, I found that such migrations had occurred in Yosemite Valley on several other occasions during the past twenty years. In February 1929, George Wright called attention to the large number of varied thrushes that had visited Yosemite Valley that winter. In his report he stated, "Not since the winter of 1924-25 has Yosemite been graced with such a lavish display of these beautiful birds. In some seasons the species may be represented by only an occasional individual, or perhaps none at all may be recorded. No wonder they arouse keen interest on such years as this when, for some reason as yet not definitely determined, they appear in numbers." In January 1932 C. C. Presnall again called attention to these birds in a report which stated, "Varied thrushes are appearing in Yosemite this fall in larger numbers, and at an earlier date than usual. These beautiful winter visitants have been recently reported by several of the Rangers from various parts of the park,

whereas they are usually seen only by a few careful observers. They often arrive about Thanksgiving time, but this year they were first noted on October 17."

It is rather interesting to note that the first observation in the fall of 1931 was on October 17—the exact date of the first observation in the fall of 1944, although in the latter instance, their call had been recognized a few days prior to that time. From these few recorded observations, it is apparent that these periodic large migrations are occasionally noted in Yosemite Valley. It may be that the rather warm valley, located as it is in the midst of the high and cold Sierra forest cover, provides a particularly attractive site for the concentration of these interesting winter visitants.

NATURE NOTELETS

As an indication of one of the many interests found in Yosemite Valley by visiting service men, Lieut. (j.g.) John A. Pond, a member of the Memphis Chapter of the Tennessee Ornithological Society, noted thirty-four species of birds during a number of walks about the Valley floor from April 9th to 13th.

According to Ranger M. B. (Buck) Evans, bear tracks were noted in the snow of the upper end of the Valley for the first time during the present season about March 15th. On March 25th, while on a snow survey to Ostrander Lake, bear tracks were noted in the snow near Bridalveil Meadow, heading downhill.

NEW EXHIBIT IN MUSEUM

A new exhibit adds interest to the "tree room" of the Yosemite Museum this summer. Prepared during the past winter, it consists of two cases containing material relative to the protection of Yosemite forests from fire, destructive forest insects and fungus diseases.

In addition to an outline of the scope of the Yosemite fire organization and the presentation of rules aimed at the prevention of forest fires, the case concerned with this subject outlines the manner in which forest fires are located and reported by the lookouts to park headquarters. This subject is of interest to many Yosemite visitors. The second case, dealing with forest insects and fungus diseases, places special emphasis on the nature and control of the western pine beetle, the lodgepole pine needle-miner, and the white pine blister rust.

(C.F.B.)