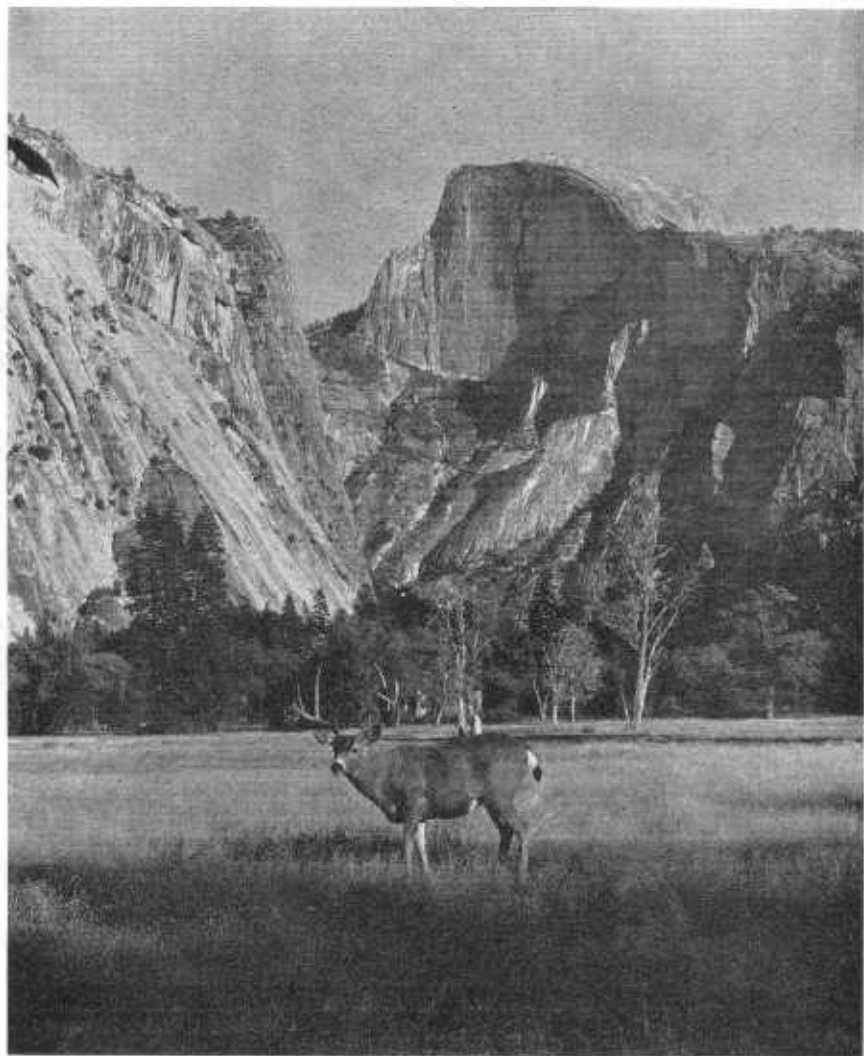


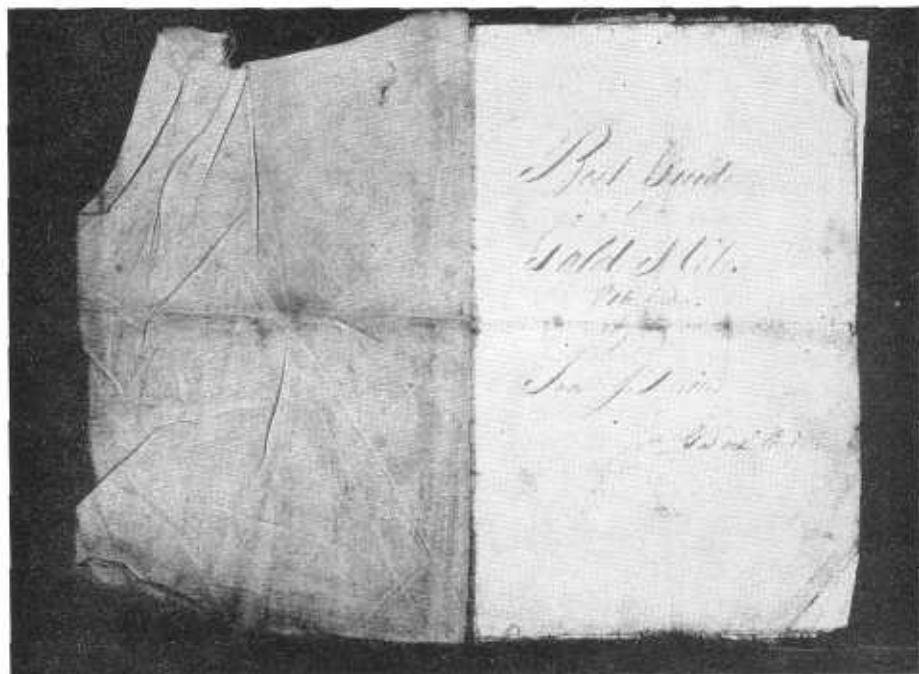
YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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*California mule deer in Ahwahnee Meadow, Half Dome in distance
—Ralph Anderson*



Courtesy of California Historical Society

THE WILLIS GUIDE

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Yosemite Nature Notes
THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF
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VOL. XXXII

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NO. 11

THE IRA J. WILLIS GUIDE TO THE GOLD MINES*

Edited, with an Introduction, by Irene D. Paden

Foreword by Carl P. Russell

FOREWORD. In the fall of 1928, I, as park naturalist in Yosemite National Park, received a letter from Mrs. M. O. Walkington, London, England. Mrs. Walkington was a member of the English family from which came Emily Ann Edmunds, the wife of James Mason Hutchings, California publisher and pioneer hotel keeper in Yosemite Valley. Mrs. Walkington offered to make available to the Yosemite Museum a collection of documents, photos, Hutchings manuscripts, and small historic objects of Yosemite significance, which had once been the property of Mr. and Mrs. J. M. Hutchings. I assured her that we wanted such things.

In due course there arrived at the Yosemite Museum an assortment of stuff, delightful to the eye of the curator. Included in the lot was an incomplete set of *Hutchings California Magazine*, manuscripts in Hutchings' handwriting representing public lectures which he delivered in America in the 1870's, numerous imprints of the broadsides and letter sheets which Hutchings published in San Francisco, a variety of early-day photographs made in the Sierra, and newspaper clippings pertaining to Yosemite and to the Hutchings family. One obscure item was a well-worn, sweat-stained longhand manuscript of a few pages of rag paper, sewed in soiled linen covers. Inserted under the cover was a note stating, "November 6, 1928. This guide to the gold mines was under the cover of the late J. M. Hutchings Diary of his journey from Jackson-ville to Sacramento in 1849. It is not referred to in the Diary but was apparently purchased by him at the time of his journey. It bears the name of the compiler, Ira J. Willis." [signed] "Charles Man."

The unique character of this gold-seekers' guide was appreciated immediately by the Yosemite Museum staff, and it was carefully recorded and placed in fireproof storage. No publicity was given to it, however, because special inquiry addressed to Mrs. Walkington brought no further information. The park naturalist reserved a niche for it in his "recollections," and, when Mrs. Paden's *In the Wake of the Prairie Schooner* appeared, his interest in the old guide was re-awakened; the Willis item did not appear in her very thorough bibliography.

We regard it to be most fitting that Mrs. Paden should now publish the old guide leaflet, and it is with further thanks to Mrs. Walkington that we consign the contents of the manuscript to Mrs. Paden's expert interpretation. The manuscript itself is still a prized possession of the Yosemite Museum, Catalog No. 5175.

CARL P. RUSSELL, Superintendent,
Yosemite National Park

[Dr. Russell has been on leave from Yosemite since Nov. 1, 1952.]

*This article is reprinted from the *California Historical Society Quarterly*, Vol. 32, No. 3, September 1953. We are greatly indebted to the publishers, the California Historical Society, and to the author, Mrs. Irene Paden, for their kind permission to reproduce this fine historic account. Because of its length, it will appear in two installments in *Yosemite Nature Notes*.—Ed.

INTRODUCTION.—The document here reproduced was written in or near Salt Lake City between the summer of 1848, when the necessary data were obtained, and the summer of 1849, when it served to guide James Mason Hutchings to California. There were similar guides, presumably duplicates of all or portions of this one, sold as late as the summer of 1850, but, if any other copy still exists, the fact is not generally known to research workers in the field of western history. The guide was not published, and but few travelers mention buying the handwritten copies.

It seems convenient to take up the matter under five headings: I. Who was Ira Willis (often spelled Willes)? II. How did he happen to write a guidebook? III. Why was such an unimpressive document salable? IV. How, without seeing a copy, have historians known that such a guide existed? V. Of what terrain or route does it treat?

I.

Ira J. Willis was one of the volunteers who made up the Mormon Battalion. With him went his brother, Sidney Willis. The two traveled to California with the battalion, thus making what is conceded to be the longest infantry march in recorded history.

Our knowledge of the activities of the Willis brothers in California is obtained mainly from the journal of Henry W. Bigler, another battalion member who, with seven or eight other members, was with James W. Marshall when Marshall discovered gold at Sutter's sawmill in January 1848. Bigler communicated with certain other members of the battalion who were then working at Sutter's Fort, telling them not to spread the news except to those who could be trusted to keep the secret. As a result, several of these Mormon boys, including Sidney Willis, obtained permission from Sutter to have a few days of vacation and to look for gold at the sawmill. As they were returning, Sidney and a companion found gold near a small island in the American River, and they guided the battalion members, who had remained at the fort, back to the place. They were fairly successful in recovering gold dust and nuggets as might have been expected, for this

became known in later months as the fabulously-rich Mormon Diggings. The island was called Mormon Island.

Bigler, who had traveled from the sawmill to the fort at the same time as Sidney Willis, but by a different route, came to an arrangement with Sutter whereby the Mormon boys agreed to finish their contract to complete the mill but afterward might mine on shares with Marshall. This they hoped would provide funds to take home to Salt Lake City. On his way back from the fort to the sawmill, Bigler camped at Mormon Island. His embellished journal, rewritten in 1872 for Hubert Howe Bancroft, reads:

We found 7 of the boys at work they had taken out that day two hundred & 50 dola. This was the spot where the few particles was found by the Messrs Willis & Hutson on the 2 of March while returning from the saw mill and thought it not much account. . . . The names of the men who were here at work was, Sidney Willis, Ira Willis, Wilford Hutson, Jesse B. Martin and Ephraim the other 2 I disremember but think they were Israel Evans and James Sty. It was a bout this time that one or boath of the Willises had bisness that called them from their mining to the Fort and it strikes me they went to Yerba Buena, at all events they met with Sam Brannan and let him in to the secret. Mr. Brannan told them that he could secure the mine as chutch property and advised for all the battalion boys to go to work in the mine and pay one tenth to him and he would turn it over to the church as their titling with the understanding at the same time that he was to come in with the Willises & Hutson haveing a shear with them in their claim. This they done.

And then, as both Bigler and subsequent history inform us, Sam Brannan not only let out the secret but published it in his paper, the *California Star*, and shouted it in the streets. The gold rush was on.

II.

In spite of the attraction of free gold, the Mormon boys fulfilled their contracts; they also remained steadfast in their determination to return to Salt Lake City and their families as soon as the mountains were passable. They wished, however, to find a better way than the one over Truckee Summit and along the Truckee River. The misadventures of the Donner Party in 1846 had given that route a bad name. Henry Bigler wrote that they wished to "pioneer out a route across the Sierra Nevada and if possible find a nearer way than to go the truckee route and shun Crossing the Truckee River 27 times as we were informed by Mr Brannan we should have to do if we went that route and very deep and rapid." As a result, the returning battalion members gathered for the journey at a place near what was later called Hangtown. They named their rendezvous Pleasant Valley and from here they started on July 4, 1848. Eventually the company numbered about forty-five men and one woman, wife of a member. Among them, either with the main company or overtaking it later, traveled Ira J. Willis.

The notes taken on this journey provided him with material for the little guidebook. His party was opening a new wagon road across the Sierra Nevada Mountains — an

important segment in the route between Salt Lake City and California — and it is possible that he was asked to jot down the mileage and certain data. If so, the archives of the Church of Latter Day Saints at Salt Lake City have no record of the matter. It is even possible that not he but someone else gathered the data; however, the final compilation bore his name and was evidently put together by Willis.

The party had about seventeen wagons. They carried everything obtainable that their ingenuity suggested might be helpful to the struggling colony on the Great Salt Lake, from two cannon for its defense to useful seed for its planting. In this way, California peas made their appearance in Utah, and "taos wheat" from Pueblo. Their course lay along the divide between the American and the Cosumnes rivers.* After passing the comparatively short Cosumnes, they were hemmed between the American and the Mokelumne.

Willing men went ahead to choose and open a road for the wagons. Within a few days, three men of an advance party were killed by Indians and Tragedy Springs was named in their memory. Over what is now called Kit Carson Pass they made their way, along the backbone of the mountain south of the modern highway and nearly a thousand feet higher. Down the boulder-choked canyon of the West Carson River they toiled, and won their way into open country near what is now Genoa in Carson Valley.

They then trekked down the main Carson which Bigler called Pilot River, fighting Indians and having

*Bigler calls the Cosumnes the Mocozyamy. Moorman, in his notation for September 22, 1850, writes: "The Cosumnes, commonly called the 'McCosma,' is a rapid little stream, here, about thirty feet wide, coursing its way to the South West, and loses itself in the Sacramento several miles below the city." *The Journal of Madison Berryman Moorman*, ed. by Irene D. Paden (San Francisco, Calif. Hist. Soc., 1948, Sp. Publ. 23), wherein may be found references to overland diaries, etc.

a man wounded. By this time it was well into August. They must have passed the site of Dayton, and, on the twelfth, kept a northwesterly course for 25 miles; they struck the Truckee River and found the "old Road" — the emigrant trail up the Truckee, opened by Caleb Greenwood and the Murphy-Stevens-Townsend Party in 1844, and which, in the interim, had been used by most California-bound emigrants. Following this trail eastward led them past the sink of the Humboldt (often called Mary's River) and along the course of this stream.

The little company now had a well-marked road ahead, punctuated by encounters with west-bound emigrant parties, and with hungry Indians who shot their animals in the hope that the carcasses would have to be left within reach. Approximately 215 miles east of the place where they had touched the Truckee River, Bigler states that they met a company of ten men with pack animals under the leadership of "Capt. S. Hinsly"—the same man well-known in the annals of California as Samuel J. Hensley. If we interpret Bigler's mileage correctly, the meeting took place twenty-odd miles west of Gravelly Ford, in the valley between Battle Mountain and Dunphy; but leeway must be allowed for error, both in Bigler's estimate and in the guidebook itself.

Hensley had been in California since 1843; he had gone east to testify at the courtmartial of John C. Fremont and was returning to the Pacific coast. The day was Sunday, August 27, 1848. The battalion men did not travel on the Sabbath, and had met for prayer in the tent of one of the company. Just as the service concluded, the westbound packers were seen coming along the trail. Bigler wrote:

We was met by Capt. S. Hinsly a packing company of 10 men. we got a way bill of our Road from here to Salt lake and not go by Ft Hall and save about 8 or 10 days travel. we learn from Mr Hinsly that it is not more than a bout 380 miles to the lake to take a serthen cut off which we are sure to find with plenty of wood water and grass a rout that he cum but waggons have never went there before a good waggon rout he got defeated in attempting to go Haistings cut off and turned back and found this knew rout of 70 miles saveing a bout 150 or 200 ml.

This was glad news for men who wanted above all things to reach their new home at Salt Lake City, which had been founded by their families the year before.

Then, a day or two later, they met a large wagon train under the guidance of Joseph C. Chiles, who attempted to give them directions to a still shorter route—probably some variation of the one he, himself, had traveled in 1841, when, with the Bidwell-Bartleson Party, he had left the Oregon Trail at the great bend of Bear River and had come southwest, north of the Great Salt Lake — through what is now Silver Zone Pass in the Toiyabe Range and Secret Pass through the Ruby Range. They were unable to find this cutoff after diligent search. The incident is of interest, however, for, while discussing the problem of cutoffs, Chiles evidently told them of his intention to find a road leading southwest to the Carson River across the Humboldt Sink. It seems probable that they had first told Chiles of the new road they had opened with so much labor across the Sierra Nevada and, by way of the West Carson River, into Carson Valley. This is purest speculation, as such a conversation apparently was not recorded; but it seems the only explanation for the directions in the Willis Guide concerning the country between the sink of the Humboldt and the Sierra Nevada, which read as follows:

The best water here [at the Sink] is in a slough that passes through a bend & a narrow Bluff. Here also you may find a new track on your left that Childs intended to make last fall which may be nearer & a less distance to do without grass & water.

By the Battalion route from the Sink to the hot Springs, no grass, poor water 20.
Thence to Truckee River, good camp. 25.

The road forks here.

You will take the left hand road to Salmon Trout river,* good camp. 25.
(Childs road if made comes in at this or the next camping place [])

Chiles was successful in establishing his projected shortcut across the desert of the sink of Humboldt River. It was an accomplished fact long before the little guidebooks were sold, but Ira Willis and his comrades could not be certain, so it was listed as a possibility.

This information, which seems to belong much farther west at the sink of Humboldt River, is inserted here, because it was at this point in their journey that the battalion men must have received the instructions.

Buying some bacon and buffalo meat from Chiles' wagon train, the two companies parted, and Willis with his comrades moved on to the head of Humboldt River, where they lost a day or two in abortive attempts to find the shorter road to the Great Salt Lake described by Chiles. The days were not wasted, however, as they thoroughly explored Bishop's Creek Canyon, which was to prove a shorter and more popular route to Fort Hall than the old road through what is now Wells, Nevada.

When they had reluctantly given up hope, they turned north through Thousand Springs Valley and along Goose Creek, until they came almost to Flatiron Mountain and turned right, up a little creek, to Granite Pass. Here they camped in the mountains, and here it was that their advance pilots returned to tell them that they had found the turn-off into Hensley's newly-made cut-off just eight miles ahead.

The cutoff, marked definitely by the two Steeple Rocks at the south portal of the City of the Rocks, was easy to find and permitted travelers to turn southeast toward Salt Lake City, instead of continuing northeast toward Fort Hall. The new route carried a large per cent of the gold-rush hordes and, in three more years, was practically to wipe out travel on the dangerous Hastings' Cutoff south of Great Salt Lake.

The people in Salt Lake City rightfully felt that the new and favorable road, traveled by the battalion boys in returning to their families, was a great contribution. Apparently Ira Willis was either given or assumed the task of assembling their data in the form of a travel guide, straight and to the point, without what might have been considered superfluous comments on the plants (other than the general term, "grass") or wild animals the traveler might find.

(To be concluded in December issue, with full transcript of original Willis Guide)



*Salmon Trout River, in this instance, refers to the Carson River, although some travelers applied the name to the Truckee.

HIGH-COUNTRY PLAYMATE

By Robert W. Hillerby, Yosemite Field School, 1953

During my first visit to Tuolumne Meadows I was surprised as I walked through the quiet, sunlit, open land to find my presence acknowledged by numerous small squirrels. At first I supposed that the shrill whistle which sounded as I approached came from a bird; but then I noticed a small erect squirrel, balanced on hind feet and holding its forelegs close to the body in a position of inquisitiveness (its portrait is on our back cover). I stood motionless so as not to frighten it, but soon my own curiosity got the better of me and I crept slowly closer. But not too close, for no sooner did I start to move than the animal turned and darted into a nearby burrow, and I was left wishing I had not moved so near. This was my first acquaintance with the Belding ground squirrel.

Nicknamed the "picket pin" because of its habit of sitting erect on its haunches to spot the approach of danger, this small mammal when seen at a distance across the meadow looks much like a picket driven into the ground to tether a horse. Actually the Belding is a timid rodent and does not wander far from its burrow; but it has a vast curiosity, and if this remains unsatisfied the animal will rise more and more until it is standing bolt upright on the soles of its hind feet. Its call of warning is a quick succession of five or six short piercing whistles, weakening slightly toward the last. This seems to caution other squirrels who immediately stop, stand, and look in the direction of the intruder. At times like these, Beldings are observed to be twitching their noses, and it is thought that the sense of smell aids

their sight and hearing. When danger approaches too close, the squirrel needs only a short dash to be safe inside its burrow. However, it does not stay long inside, but soon pokes its head out again, to just below the level of the eyes, to see once more what is happening.

This mammal was first collected in 1885 by Lyman Belding, an early resident of Stockton and a naturalist of considerable attainment. It was subsequently classified and named *Citellus beldingi*. Its general coloration is light yellowish brown, paler on the undersurface of the body, and there is a broad area of bright reddish brown down the middle of the back. The length of the body is about 7 inches, with the tail being about a third as long. Older adults show greater size, especially of the head, and males are a trifle larger than females. As it scampers on its short legs across flat land where there is not much grass, the animal has a rather heavy run with little up-and-down movement, and the tail is kept down. When negotiating high grass it does not part the stalks and plunge through, but rather jumps high over the grass, thereby obtaining good glimpses of possible enemies in the surrounding area.

The "picket pin" is a resident of the grassy valleys of the high mountains; in Yosemite it is seen principally in Tuolumne Meadows and similar high country. It inhabits the open levels and digs its burrows in the meadows near sources of food. The Belding is only rarely found in timber or brushlands. It is strictly terrestrial and does not climb. Sometimes individuals are seen to clam-

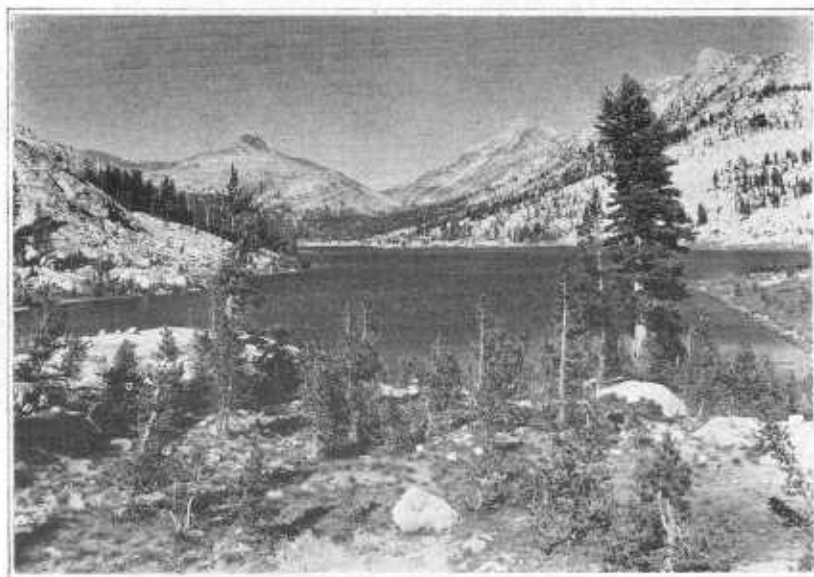
ber over small rocks for a look around, but there is very little activity on boulders. Above timberline where there may be limited patches of grass around little glacial lakes, a small population is often supported.

The Belding burrows beneath rocks or logs, and frequently appropriates the tunnels of pocket gophers. Their mounds are seldom conspicuous, even though, as found in the investigation of one burrow system, enough dirt must have been excavated to fill two 5-gallon cans. The absence of dirt in the burrow or about the entrance is possibly due to heavy rains or melting snow which would wash it away. The average width of the entrance is 2 inches. In the investigation referred to, the burrow was dug generally to a depth of about 13 inches, the animal being limited by the increasing amount of moisture in the soil at lower levels. The total length of tunnel was 54 feet.

Belding ground squirrels seem to prefer the low-growing herbaceous

plants for foods, and depend less on the larger seeds, nuts, and roots than the California ground squirrel which lives at much lower elevations. Foraging through the meadows, they feed on the stems and seeds of wild grasses and are especially fond of the fruits of mustards. Frequently grasshoppers are eaten and perhaps other insects as well. When feeding, the Belding sits in a hunched position with its body supported by the hind legs, and pulls the food to its mouth with the forefeet. There is no evidence of storing much food, since caches are seldom found in the tunnels. Observations of above-ground activities have not indicated storage, and the cheek pouches of the animal are rather small. One individual was seen to store hay, but later examination showed that none of the material was used for food.

Young "picket pins" are born about the beginning of July, usually in litters numbering up to six. One brood per year is produced. They



Anderson

Tilden Lake—"picket pin" country

grow rapidly, being one-third fully grown when they first appear above ground at the age of 2 weeks. As they first emerge, scampering around the mouth of the burrow, the mother watches over them closely. At the slightest irregularity or indication of danger she gives the warning whistle, in this case a lower pitched double note or bark, and the young quickly disappear down the burrow. On one occasion a litter of six was watched playing in the vicinity of the hole, when the mother sounded her alarm and much difficulty was encountered as they all tried to crowd at once into the 2-inch entrance.

Of all the species of ground squirrels, Beldings appear to be the hardiest in their ability to endure the long, cold winters characteristic of the high mountains in which they live. Their habit of hibernation tides them over the extremes. Very little is known about the duration of the winter sleep, though it probably is dependent on factors such as altitude, weather, age, and food supply. Some observers have indicated a long hibernation, perhaps 8 months; others believe it to be shorter, the abundance of green food all summer enabling the Beldings to stay active later than other species of the lower altitudes. Most ground squirrels become excessively fat during the late summer and early fall months. As the cold weather ensues and snow covers the ground, they use underground burrows for their sound winter dormancy that resembles death itself. Body temperatures which approach the coldness of the surrounding ground have been recorded, in some cases at the freezing point. "Picket pins" have been

found out of hibernation in the Tuolumne Meadows region as early as April 26 before the snow had gone, and others have been seen as late as September and October after the first snow had fallen.

Small rodents often furnish tempting meals for other animals, and the Belding has its enemies among the larger high-mountain carnivores. Weasels, martens, badgers, and coyotes have been observed running down and attacking it, and these predators surely take their toll of the little "picket pin," thereby rendering its shrill whistle and erect, watchful posture very important to survival. Upon close inspection of the fur of this squirrel, numerous small, black, hairless areas are often noted. They are due either to parasites or to fighting. When fighting with other members of the species over a tidbit of food, Beldings usually play a bluffing game, chasing each other vigorously until one gives up. If really angry they grab and bite, hanging on with their teeth while rolling over and over, and when one finally bites through the fur the other quits and runs off as fast as possible. After such actions, wet and well-chewed places may be found on the body. They do not seem to fight with chipmunks over food and are seldom seen chasing these small animals.

Native to the high Sierra, burrowing beneath the beautiful mountain meadows, the Belding ground squirrel or "picket pin" as he is affectionately called is an interesting playmate for the mountain hiker. With his whistling call of recognition and his very human curiosity he welcomes one to the high country in true old-fashioned mountaineer style.

A LITTER FOUND IN LITTER

By Richard R. Wason, Ranger Naturalist

Several visitors to the Mariposa Grove of giant sequoias were somewhat startled recently to see an otherwise sane-looking ranger naturalist lifting fallen logs and peering under same with more than a casual interest. Speculation on the nature of this phenomenon ranged from termite hunting to a rather unsubtle suggestion that the naturalist was bereft of his senses. As a matter of fact, a photogenic salamander was his quarry, which seeking, however, was to go unrequited.

But, as is so often the case in natural explorations, a reward other than the one sought was forthcoming. As a log near the fallen Massachusetts tree was lifted, there was a great scurrying about, flashes of brown, white, and steel gray, and considerable high-pitched squeaking. A mother white-footed mouse and her seven nurslings had been rudely disturbed. With much haste the mother mouse made her way to the end of the log that still rested on the ground, desperately seeking cover, with five of the youngsters hanging on for dear life! In the

2 or 3 minutes during which the log was elevated, the mouse and her awkward cargo of hitchhikers made several forays outward from the meager shelter, apparently trying to gather up the missing pair of offspring. On the last of these trips, one of the two was picked up, kittenlike, in its mother's mouth and was carried a short distance. At that moment a passing automobile ("Looking for termites, Ranger?") frightened her so that this sixth passenger was dropped, and the mother et al made for a cavity beneath another nearby log, dropping a third little squeaker on the way. As two beady eyes surveyed the scene from their subterranean retreat, I reassembled the trio of temporary orphans—three blind mice who could barely crawl, much less run. Placing them in the nest, I noticed that it was built of bits of shredded paper (at last, something good can be said for human litter!). Soon after, mother mouse and the rest of her brood returned to the nest. The entire episode was almost as exciting to the watcher as it must have been to those being watched.





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Dan Anderson