



# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES



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## Are the Gray Squirrels Coming Back?

Ranger Naturalist Eald Michael

On the morning of October 10 while out for my daily walk, my attention was attracted by the unusual behavior of a number of California woodpeckers. They were making a great fuss and I could tell by the tone of their voices that they were reviling some enemy. The woodpeckers were gathered in a certain oak in the grove near the Awahnee gate. Birds were flying about in the crown of the tree and as I approached I realized that a number of blue-fronted jays had joined forces with the woodpeckers and were adding their voices to the din. My first thought was that the birds were mobbing an owl. Not the pigmy owl, however, for I know that the pigmies and the California woodpeckers are on good terms. It must be, thought I, one of the larger owls, or a weasel. When close enough to locate the center of concern it was not long before I spied the object that was the cause of all the commotion. Much to my surprise the enemy turned out to be a beautiful gray squirrel. Gray squirrels are not popular with California woodpeckers because of their habit of raiding the woodpecker's winter supply of acorns. The squirrel was crouching on a limb with his back against the main trunk. He was securely settled and might have been enjoying the morning sunshine but for his tormentors. However, under the barrage of curses he remained undisturbed and sat motionless with his

plumed tail curled over his back.

Ten years ago it was estimated that there were 70 gray squirrels to the square mile on the floor of Yosemite Valley. Then came disease and the squirrels died off to the very last one. While no gray squirrels were seen on the floor of the valley for several years there was still the hope that there was enough seed left in other districts to eventually repopulate the valley. Of recent years gray squirrels have been occasionally seen along the highway leading into the valley, and now comes after many years this record of a fine big fellow at the upper end of the valley. And so, there is still hope that these beautiful animals will again lend charm to the landscape of Yosemite.

An interesting feature in connection with the dying off of the gray squirrels was the fact that the following year the little Tamrac squirrel, or Sierra chickaree, began to appear in the valley. Year after year the chickarees increased in numbers and now they are common in all sections of the valley. It seems odd that these two species of squirrel could not live peaceably together as there is no great conflict between them in regard to forage habits. During the winter months the chickaree lives almost exclusively on pine nuts, while the squirrel prefers acorns and pepper-nuts. Should the gray squirrels come back it will be interesting to see what happens to the chickarees.

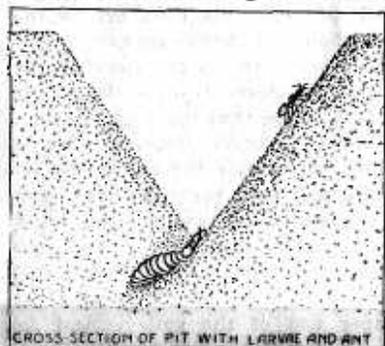
## A FIERCE TRAPPER OF INSECTS

George Crowe, Assistant Park Naturalist.

"Doodle bug! Doodle bug!" Just the name caused many visitors to smile, while out on our nature walks about Yosemite valley this summer.

To some folks it sounded like a joke; to others it brought back memories of childhood days when they used to lie on their stomachs in the woods and call the doodle bugs out of their little sandy pits.

The doubters were never fully satisfied until the ranger-naturalist



had captured a specimen of this weird looking creature, more generally called an ant lion.

Watching one back under a small mound of sand, while held in the palm of the hand, or witnessing the tragic end of a poor ant as he disappeared in the clutch of the ant lion at the bottom of one of the little pits, demonstrated that doodle bugs are active members of the life of the forests.

Hundreds of the little conical pits or traps were in evidence in the fine soil about the yellow pines or in the dust along the edge of the trails. Some were found above the 7000-foot elevation. The largest were

about two inches in diameter.

Late in the summer many colonies of tiny pits were seen, all within a radius of one or two feet. The freshly hatched larvae dig their pits immediately. They are formed by throwing the sand with a violent backward flip of the head, while the larvae back around the circumference of the pit as it deepens and tapers to a point.

These fierce little miners also throw the sand to confuse and knock down their victims struggling on the steep slopes of the pit in a desperate effort to escape the clutches of the cruel jaws at the bottom.

The mature insect would never be suspected of having sprung from the ugly, cruel larvae, for their frail bodies are adorned with delicate, many-veined wings, and they spend little time on the wing.

Another species, *Vermileo opacus*, is found in the Yosemite region from 6000 to 9000 feet in elevation. They are especially noticeable about Sentinel Dome and Mount Hoffman. Their pits have more vertical walls.

This fly larvae is of particular interest because of the fact that although so different in structure, the insect has adapted itself to exactly the same habits as the ant lion. It is difficult to locate this larvae, as they assume a most curious hook-like attitude and are yellowish, stick-like individuals.

The "doodle bugs" are much easier to find and will always prove of interest to the visitors in Yosemite Valley.

The gorgeous autumn colors mostly reds and yellows, will soon be gone.

An azalea bush at the Museum just stopped blooming a second time this year.

## MANY DEER IN SEPTEMBER

By Enid Michael, Ranger-Naturalist

During the last week of the month there was a noticeable increase of deer on the floor of the valley. Among the new comers were many grand bucks, some with still the tawny summer coats, and others garbed in the sleek "blue" winter pelage. At this time of year deer are often seen munching acorns under the Kellogg oaks. And by the way, the Kellogg oaks produced a fairly good crop of acorns. On the other hand the *Chrysolepis* oaks produced practically no acorns at all. While some of the bucks still have antlers in velvet others have hard and polished antlers that are to carry them thru the rutting season. The first indication of the approach of the rutting season, was noted September 25. On this date a dozen bucks of various sizes were seen in mad pursuit of an attractive doe. Although the bucks appeared greatly excited there were none among the band with swollen necks and the bleary



eyes that come with the rutting season.

## HORNETS WAR ON YELLOW JACKETS

C. C. Pretnall, Assistant Park Naturalist

In the autumn yellow jackets are a troublesome pest around camps, but Ranger Jack Moody has found an easy way to exterminate them—just find a nest of hornets, bring them in and sic them onto the yellow jackets.

Ranger Moody reports that yellow jackets have been very bad at the Buck Camp outpost station. Recently, however, some white-faced hornets (*Vespula infernalis*) have been destroying them. A hornet was seen to lazily pursue a yellow

jacket through the air, pounce upon it suddenly, cut off its head, and carry away the body. Moody saw many yellow jackets meet their fate in a similar manner, and was even able to distinguish the movement of the hornets' mandibles in biting off the heads of the yellow jackets.

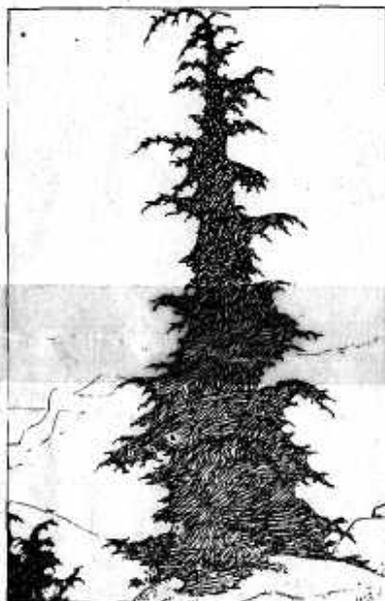
Why the hornets were doing this, or what use they were making of the headless bodies is not known; but Jack knows the yellow jackets are disappearing, so he is strong for the hornets.



### EXCEPTIONAL SPECIMENS MOUNTAIN HEMLOCKS

By Assistant Park Naturalist  
C. C. Presnall

The mountain hemlock is known and admired by all Sierra mountaineers, but most of us think of it



as a slender, graceful little tree, possessing none of the massive size and rugged qualities seen in so

many of the conifers. It does, however, attain large size in certain protected locations. I chanced to find such a favorable spot one July day while clambering around the flanks of Tenaya Peak.

The descent of a very steep coullor on the north face of the mountain brought me into a level rock rimmed basin embracing perhaps three acres of alpine meadow dotted with hemlocks (*Tsuga Mertensiana*). These trees attracted me by their unusual size, several having a diameter of over four feet, and all exhibiting the heavy, bold strength usually associated with sugar pines. The largest one measured 19 feet in circumference four feet above the base. The meadow where it grows is about 9400 feet above sea level.

It is interesting to note that John Muir has recorded an even larger mountain hemlock: "The very largest specimen I ever found was 19 feet, seven inches in circumference four feet from the ground, growing on the edge of Lake Hollow, at an elevation of 9250 feet above the level of the sea."

Flight of fowl and habitude,  
Of the tenants of the wood;  
How the tortoise tears his shell,  
How the woodchuck digs his cell  
And the ground mole sinks his well;  
How the robin feeds her young,  
How the oriole's nest is hung."

—Whittier



## A MOUNTAIN TRAGEDY

R. H. Rose, Ranger - Naturalist

One afternoon in early June, near the Glacier Point Mountain House, an unusual opportunity to observe the mountain weasel (*Mustela arizonensis*) presented itself.

The usual early afternoon quietness was interrupted by cries of alarm of the little golden mantled ground squirrels. Looking in the direction of commotion, we saw as many as a half dozen squirrels, perched like picket pins, looking about uttering excited cries while a little farther down slope another was running for its life from a mountain weasel. Seeing the predicament of its fellow clansman, a second squirrel gave chase to the weasel until the latter pounced upon the neck of its prey. With a vicious thrust the weasel's teeth pierced the skull of its victim just behind the ears. The little fellow that was giving chase to the intruder became frightened, and with all his fellows scurried to safety.

We moved closer to get a better view. The weasel resented the intrusion by climbing a little fir tree, leaving his prize on the ground. The lithe little animal looked much like a "vest pocket edition" of the mountain lion as it stood a short distance from the body of the tree upon a low limb, licking its chops. The coloration was a uniform shade of brown on its upper side and a rich, creamy yellow below. Its body was about eight or nine inches in length and its tail about five inches. Its slender body and small head enable it to go into the burrows of ground squirrels and other small animals.

The mountain weasel is favored by nature in many ways. It is exceptionally lithe and strong of body. During the summer months its characteristic color is a dull brown on top, which blends very effectively against the drab forest floor, and cream colored below. During the winter months the brown and cream colored fur is replaced by a white coat, which adapts the animal to the white snow background. Thus, the mountain weasel is adapted to moving unobserved in his environment in both summer and winter.

The weasel is very bloodthirsty. This seems to be realized by the smaller burrowing animals and the birds, for the presence of this arch enemy is immediately announced by cries from these little denizens. The weasel makes his home in rock piles, decayed logs, or about buildings. His slender body, agility, strength, and adeptness at climbing trees, give him a wide variety of bird and mammal life upon which to prey.

After observing the crafty little animal on the limb of the fir tree for about ten minutes we withdrew a little farther away. With seeming fearlessness he came down the tree, picked up his golden mantled prize, and ran to his den among the rocks more than fifty yards away. A full grown weasel weighs between seven and twelve ounces. A full grown golden mantled ground squirrel weighs between five and eight ounces. It was astonishing to see how easily the weasel carried his prey, weighing two-thirds his

own weight, to his den. The blue jays fussed vociferously, sweeping down several times flogging and pecking at the head of the wiry intruder, forcing him to drop his burden to protect himself. Yet the cunning and bloodthirsty little animal soon succeeded in reaching his home among the rocks, taking his game with him. Shortly the excited jays quieted down, thus dropping the curtain signifying the end of one of Nature's tragedies that befall many of her citizens of every clan from the largest and most powerful down to the smallest and most insignificant.

### RECENT MUSEUM ACCESSIONS

Through the generosity of Mrs. E. E. Brownell of San Francisco two collections of very rare pictures have been added to our museum. Eighteen pictures 7x10½ inches together with section seven of "Picturesque California and the Region West of the Rocky Mountains," edited by John Muir, and a set of 28 photographs 17x21¼ inches taken by Eadward Muybridge in 1871. This set is in especially good condition because it has always been kept in a mahogany display case which Mrs. Brownell also donated to the museum.

Through the courtesy of assistant to the superintendent, James V. Lloyd, an enlargement of a photograph of Director Albright was presented to the museum.

J. E. Patterson of Pinehurst Ore., presented four stereographs taken during the early days of Yosemite.

Charles Francis Saunders presented a copy of his newest book, "Finding the Worthwhile in California," which is just off the press **HUTCHINGS' MEMENTOES**

Mrs. M. W. Walkington of London, England, a daughter of Mr. J. M. Hutchings of early-day Yosemite fame, presented a number of early Yosemite records and reports, among which I list the following.

Bi-ennial reports of the commissioners that managed the Yosemite

Valley and Mariposa Grove of Big Trees for the years 1880, 1882, 1883, 1884, 1885, 1886, 1887, 1888, 1891, 1892, 1895, 1896, 1897 and 1898.

Seven copies of "Proceedings of the Society of California Pioneers" for the years 1893, 1894, 1895 and 1898.

A description and guide for the Calaveras Cave, printed in early days.

A tourist guide to the Yosemite Valley published in 1877, written by Mr. Hutchings; also some early letters and photographs of Mr. Hutchings, recalling the time when he was guardian of Yosemite.

C. W. Mitchell of the Whitlock Mining Company presented a gold quartz specimen mined near Mariposa in the Spread Eagle mine this year, containing \$16 worth of gold in a 7.1-ounce specimen. This quartz is now on display in a special exhibit in our history room.

John Wegner of Yosemite presented one-quarter ounce of placer gold which he took from the Merced river rock and gravel at Bagby recently. This gold is also on exhibit in our history room.

Paul Eastman Richards, a member of the 1930 class, Yosemite School of Field Natural History, presented us with two electric questioners which will be used to stimulate interest in our animal exhibit room.

## BIRD REPORT FOR SEPTEMBER

ENID MICHAEL Ranger-Naturalist

During the month of September normal weather prevailed in Yosemite Valley—that is to say the weather was mostly fair, with few showers and no freezing nights. Early in the month there were occasional threatening skies, but no rain actually came until the 24th of the month. Then came again a stretch of fair weather, but the month came to a close with 48 hours of almost steady rain, a rain which revived Yosemite Falls.



Blue-fronted Jay

As the month drew to a close the first sparkles of autumn color began to appear in the exotic trees along the village street. High on the cliffs the maples were beginning to show faintly golden and in the forest dogwood flashed occasional sprays of fiery color.

The end of the month found the bird population of the valley at a very low ebb. Never during the last 10 years were birds quite so scarce during the September month. This condition, however, was to be expected as the bird population was far below normal during the spring and summer months. The blue-fronted Jay was the most common bird this month and the only bird that held to num-

bers comparable with other years.

With the Ahwahnee Hotel grounds securely fenced against the deer, and with wild flowers coming back to this section, we find conditions within the enclosure favorable to certain kinds of birds. Here we find hummingbirds, goldfinches, and several kinds of sparrows. In fact during this month the Ahwahnee grounds were the most "birdie" section of the valley.

**BIRDS NOTED**

**Great Blue Heron**—The great blue was the only one seen on September 5, although fresh tracks were seen on later occasions.

**Band-tailed Pigeon**—A small flock of a dozen birds was probably present throughout the month. The larger flocks of other years were missing.

**Mourning Dove**—A lone bird seen September 29.

**Cooper Hawk**—Three birds were seen on September 29.

**Sparrow Hawk**—Rare. Lone birds occasionally noted.

**Horned Owl**—Heard on three different nights. On the last night of the month there was a serenade.

**Pigmy Owl**—A lone bird seen September 24.

**Belted Kingfisher**—No change in status. Always to be found in the usual haunts.

**Hairy Woodpecker**—Probably a few birds present throughout the month, as we could always find a bird or two in certain cottonwood groves.

**Willow Woodpecker**—No doubt a few present throughout the month.

**White-headed Woodpecker**—A lone bird frequently noted about the mouth of Indian Canyon.

**Red-breasted Sapsucker**—A lone bird noted in the apple orchard. No doubt this bird was present for a number of days, as his workings there were quite extensive.

**Pileated Woodpecker**—A lone male bird noted September 5.

California Woodpecker—Common in the Kellogg oak groves on the north side of the valley, but there was a noticeable decrease in numbers toward the end of the month.

Red-shafted Flicker—Several birds likely to be noted on an hour's walk.

White-throated Swift—Three birds seen September 24.

Anna Hummingbird—A lone male noted September 1 and 2.



Calliope Hummingbird

Calliope Hummingbird—Four birds present in the Ahwahnee primrose garden during the last week of the month.

Black Phoebe—A single bird noted on three different occasions.

Wood Pewee—A single bird noted September 24.

Traill Flycatcher—A single bird noted September 25.

Blue-fronted Jay—The most common bird of the month. No apparent decrease in numbers.

Meadowlark—A lone bird noted September 24.

Brewer Blackbird—A small flock noted September 27 and 28.

Evening Grosbeak—Large flocks on the first day of the month; after this date only scattered pairs.

Green-backed Goldfinch—A flock of at least 25 birds probably present throughout the month. Always to be found in the primrose garden in the Ahwahnee grounds.

White-crowned Sparrow—A small band present in the primrose garden from September 24 until end of month. Individuals occasionally noted elsewhere.

Chipping Sparrow—Lone birds noted September 3 and 5.

Sierra Junco—Not numerous, but present daily. No large flocks.

Song Sparrow—A lone bird noted September 24.

Lincoln Sparrow—Three birds seen September 25 and 27.

Sacramento Towhee—Rare. Lone birds noted on four occasions.

Green-tailed Towhee—A lone bird was seen in the primrose garden September 1 and 3.

Black-headed Grosbeak—A lone male bird was frequently seen at the mouth of Indian Canyon. Not otherwise noted.

Wabbling Vireo—A lone bird seen on September 5.

Cassin Vireo—Rather common the first five days of the month, and song heard daily until the fifth.

Hutton Vireo—A pair noted on September 27.

Yellow Warbler—A pair of these birds seen September 27.

Audubon Warbler—Began to appear early in the month. Fairly common the last week in the month.

Hermit Warbler—A handsome male bird seen with a flock of Golden-crowned Kinglets on September 27.

Water Ouzel—Back on the main river the last week of the month. Three birds noted along a mile of river. A bird in full song September 28.



Western Tanager

Western Tanager—A male bird noted September 1 and 3.

Canyon Wren—Rare, but individuals always to be found in certain talus slopes.

Sierra Creeper—Rather common. Likely to be found in any section of the valley.

Red-breasted Nuthatch—Rare. Lone birds occasionally seen.

Mountain Chickadee—No doubt present daily. More numerous the last week of the month.

Golden-crowned Kinglet—A flock of six or eight birds twice noted during the last week of the month.

Western Robin—Rare, but no doubt a few birds present throughout the month.

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Superintendent



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