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Feeding Habits of the Woodpeckers in the Yosemite Valley

By Enid Michael

This is the first of a series of Notes which will consider all of the Yosemite Woodpeckers. Mrs. Michael writes from her original observations, and these records of interesting incidents are true contributions to Western ornithology.—C. A. H.

There are six resident species of woodpecker in the Yosemite valley and five species of casual visitants. All of these woodpeckers have somewhat familiar feeding habits—that is, to say that each species spends more or less time seeking food on tree trunk or branch. And yet, having similar tastes and similar hunting habits, in the struggle for existence there is very little competition between the different species, as one species seldom encroaches upon the hunting grounds of another species. Each species of resident woodpecker has its own peculiar niche.

The Modoc Hairy woodpecker (*Dryobates villosus orius*), a resident species, gleanes his living almost entirely from the bark of

trees, and he confines his activities mostly to the main trunk and the greater branches. Here in the valley he shows a decided preference for willows and cottonwoods, but any dead tree that offers insect food is likely to attract his attention. The Hairy is an active bird and in the course of a day's foraging cover considerable territory as he moves from tree to tree. He is not such a systematic worker as the White-headed woodpecker and seldom does he spend much time in any one tree.

The Hairy woodpecker almost never comes to the ground for food, nor have we ever seen him pluck insects from the air, in the manner of a fly-catcher. In the willows and cottonwoods he drills and prods

in the rotten or decaying wood for insects and larvae. He pries and hammers off bark and searches all interesting cavities. In the conifers he is likely to work in the manner of a White-headed woodpecker, flaking off scales of bark, using his bill as a wedge, rather than as a drill. In drilling, his touch is lighter than that of either the California woodpecker or the Red-shafted Flicker, and the keen observer may often guess the identity before seeing the bird.

WILLOW WOODPECKER
(*Dryobates' pucescens turati*)

The feeding habits of the Willow woodpecker are similar and yet different from the habits of his large cousin, the Hairy woodpecker. The Hairy feeds almost entirely on the trunks and larger branches, where he often swings about in the manner of a chickadee. The Willow confines his foraging activities almost exclusively to the broad-leaved trees, but on rare occasions he may resort to young Incense cedars, where, by scaling off the loose outside bark in the manner of a White-headed woodpecker, he uncovers certain choice morsels in the form of insect or larva. The cottonwood and the Kellogg oak furnish hunting ground for the Willow woodpecker, but the willow is his favorite tree, and it is in the willow thickets that he is most likely to be found. Like the Hairy woodpecker, however, he moves around a great deal, and one can never be sure just where to find him, except during the nesting season.

Encased under the tender bark of willow twigs is a form of larval life very attractive to the little woodpecker. These larvae occupy tiny pockets in the sap-wood just

under the bark, and it seems that the Willow can detect infested twigs by sounding the bark with his bill. When he strikes a promising twig, he gets busy at once to uncover his prey. Striking sharp blows with his bill, he cuts through the bark, and then, bracing his feet, he takes a firm hold of the frayed bark and strips down long strings. Perhaps he will expose several inches to a foot of sap-wood. The larvae laid bare he consumes at once. This process is often continued until a willow branch several feet long may be entirely stripped of bark. Naturally, these stripped twigs must die, and for some years to follow, dead stalks, densely pitted with tiny pockets, mark the site where once a Willow woodpecker enjoyed a banquet.

A trick peculiar to the Willow woodpecker in connection with his drumming is his habit of choosing a branch to which a few dry leaves still hang so that there may be a rustling accompaniment to his song - if these rolling drum calls be his song. Because of his habit of working among the smaller branches, the Willow woodpecker may often be identified by the sound of his bill beat.

One season a pair of Willow woodpeckers drilled out a nest-hole in an old apple tree in the Lamon orchard. When the young came along, the parent birds did much foraging among the branches of the apple trees where wooley aphids and lady-bird beetles were abundant. On another occasion a pair of Willows brought their family to the Curry apple orchard, where, among the twigs and branches, the young were taught to forage for themselves.

Late in the season, when the Red-breasted Sapsuckers come down

from above the "rim" to forage in the apple orchards of the valley, the Willow woodpeckers have been known to raid the sap-pits of these birds. Whether the Willows actually ate the sap or merely collected the insects gathered about the pits we were unable to determine.

The Willow is one of the resident woodpeckers.

FEATHERED MOUNTAIN CLIMBERS

J. T. Emlen Jr.

No, this is not a dissertation on the home life of the side-hill gouger as the title might lead one to think. The feathered mountain climbers are birds that have wandered up into the mountains above their normal range, and the particular ones of which I am going to speak are those which happened to fall under my observation last summer in my hikes around the park with the School of Field Natural History.

It has often been observed that in the late summer many birds wander north of their breeding range before they are pushed south by the approach of winter. In the Yosemite, circumstances make these postseasonal migrations unusually attractive and easy for the birds. Instead of having to travel some six hundred miles to get from one life zone to another, the bird merely has to climb 2000 feet. Under such circumstances, one would expect to occasionally find some bird which has straggled out of its normal range into the mountains.

OUT OF HIS ELEMENT

Perhaps the most unusual of the record was one of a turkey vulture

observed on Mount Dana at an altitude of more than 10,000 feet by the entire class and several other competent observers on August 5. By all rights this bird had no excuse for being up above 4000 feet, and since the bird was not seen at close range, most of the party were extremely skeptical of its identity. Ranger-Naturalist Sharsmith no doubt thinks the record quite unworthy of mention, but if my reputation is worth staking, I am willing to stake it on it. The bird may have been flying in its sleep, but nevertheless there it was, with its characteristic soaring flight, small head and up-curved wings. In any case, we will have to leave this record to the discretion of anyone who wishes to be discreet.

A second interesting record was made by Jack Frost and myself when we observed a Western meadowlark on the shores of Helen Lake at 8000 feet altitude on July 23. This bird should also have been down in the valley with the turkey vultures, but, like a great many birds, it had wandered up after its nesting duties were completed. Several other high-altitude records have been established by the meadowlark, the highest being 9700 feet near Ten Lakes in 1915.

On July 19 Bell and I spotted an ash-throated flycatcher within a few hundred feet of the summit of Cloud's Rest; in other words, about 9700 feet above the sea. When it saw us it flew off and up into the air until it must have nearly reached the 10,000-foot contour. Three weeks later I saw another at Glen Aulin at 8100 feet. Even this is high for a bird intended to stay in the Sonoran zone.

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Yosemite Indians Revive Old Customs

C. C. PRESNALL, Junior Park Naturalist.

Reviving old tribal customs after nine years of disuse, the acorn dance was this year celebrated by the remnant of the Miwok Indian tribe still living in Yosemite Valley. Ceremonies of thanksgiving for the bountiful acorn crop commenced on October 1 and lasted for four days and nights, culminating in a grand feast and dance on Sunday, Oct. 4. About fifty Indians participated in the celebration, which was witnessed by less than a dozen whites.

The climax of the feast, which we witnessed on Sunday afternoon, was a picturesque sight. In an open space in the Indian village several squaws were completing the cooking of the acorn meal, using hot stones to heat the baskets of mush, just as their ancestors did. Paposes ran about underfoot, surreptitiously tasting the mush that adhered to stones removed from the cooking-baskets. On a nearby knoll the men of the village roasted steaks over an open fire. As we sat among them waiting for the dances to start one of the older squaws told of the preceding days of preparation.

A DANCING MARATHON

For three days and nights the dancers had performed the acorn dance as a token of thanks to "Coyote-Man," an important deity of Miwok Indian mythology. They were supposed to abstain from food during that time but, our informant said scornfully, nodding towards the younger Indians, "Not all do it; some eat." During the third day 10 selected squaws ground the acorns for the feast—acorns from this year's crop which could not be eaten until consecrated by the ceremonies.

The meal was ground exactly as in the old days, using stone mortars and pestles made long before the white man invaded Yosemite. Four huge leaching basins were made of clean sand and in them the finely ground meal was leached with water to remove the bitter tannin. On Sunday morning the cooking had been done so that by the time our old Indian friend had ceased talking everything was in readiness for the dances which must precede the feast.

BID TO THE FEAST

A monotonous chant from the roundhouse announced the dances. Going inside we found the dancers, men and women, kneeling in a circle chanting and keeping time with split sticks and cocoon rattles. Soon this ceased and Lemee, the chief dancer, arose to give the invitation to the feast. In his own language he delivered a loud and dramatic recital in which I was only able to distinguish the words "miwok" (people) and "oosoomatee" (grizzly bear) repeated several times. Occasionally he would throw acorn meal into the air, and all the while the chanting continued. I learned later that he was talking to the spirits of his ancestors, inviting them to come and join the feast, and that the meal thrown into the air was for them to eat.

After two more dances (or chants) inside the roundhouse, Lemee led the dancers out and around the fires, where the meal had been cooked. All who expected to eat at the feast were then asked to join in the dance, moving slowly around in a large circle, with the dancers

chanting and shaking their rattles vigorously over the fires. We poor ignorant palefaces didn't know the chant, had no rattles, and couldn't understand what it was all about, but we at least managed a fair imitation of the slow, undulating, stamping gait of the Indians. To terminate the dance an old squaw spread acorn gruel four times around the fires, allowing it to burn so that it might be carried into the air in the four directions to be eaten by the spirits of the dead. In the old days no Miwok Indian dared eat of the new acorn crop until the spirits had been thus appeased.

NOT FOR THE PALEFACE

A meal of acorn bread cannot be thoroughly enjoyed by a white man until he has spent a long time becoming accustomed to this peculiar, flat-tasting, gelatinous substance. No salt or other condiment is added to the bread, but the meat eaten with it is usually very salty. The Indians gave us liberal servings of both the bread and the meat. The latter was delicious, but one taste of the bread was enough for most of us. It resembled an oily mixture of corn meal mush and blanch-mange minus the sugar and flavoring. Its food value is unquestionable, however, since it was the staff of life for all the Indian tribes that once inhabited the interior of California.

After the feast more dances were given, lasting far into the night. These dances were chiefly expressions of thanks for the abundant acorn crop, and petitions for an equally large crop next year. There was a fire dance for the fire that heated the cooking stones; a stone dance for the stones that cooked the meal; and a basket dance for the baskets in which it was cooked. Then there were dances to the

"First People," who made the world, and especially to "Coyote-Man," one of the most important of the "First People."

MAY BE THE LAST

At the close of the four-day ceremony we compared notes and found that we had all been so busy looking and listening that photography had been forgotten, hence this acorn dance which is quite probably the last one the Yosemite Miwoks will ever hold, will remain preserved only in our memories. Photographs would have been disappointing and inadequate, however, since none of the Indians wore costumes except Lemee, the chief dancer. The real spirit of the olden days could only have been preserved in a sound picture. Before many years the songs and chants will be forgotten, just as the costumes are now replaced by overalls and aprons.

A New Record for Yosemite

(An excerpt from notes made by Ranger Naturalist Enid Michael on Sept. 5, 1931.)

..... While we were sitting, watching the warblers, up the valley came winging a most spectacular bird. A black and white bird of steady wing-beat, with a great long tail. With the striking color scheme and the long, floppy tail, no bird is more easily recognized—it was of course the magpie. The magpie came to perch not far from where we sat and we were able to identify it as belonging to the yellow-billed race. This was a new record, as neither the black-billed nor the yellow-billed magpie had ever before been reported from Yosemite Valley.



YOSEMITE ANIMALS

Four-Footed Mountaineer

Ranger **BILL MYERS**

Ranger-Naturalist Sharsmith was guiding a party to the summit of Mount Lyell this summer and had just succeeded in getting the entire group over the extremely rugged arête, or knife-edge, that is one way of getting from the glacier to the top of the mountain. For several hundred feet the naturalist had had to let down his Alpine rope which the less-experienced climbers used to aid themselves in getting over huge, slick, granite boulders and in ascending almost vertical chimneys. When he had hoisted them all over the last difficult place, they sat down a moment to catch their breath and look over the scene below them. Five hundred feet below lay Lyell glacier, largest in the Yosemite region of the Sierra. Little streams of water running off the surface of the ice finally converged a couple of miles below to form the headwaters of the Lyell fork of the Tuolumne river. A mile farther on was timberline, 10,500 feet, where only gnarled and scrubby white bark pines could exist.

Being so far removed from any appreciable amount of vegetation one would scarcely be on the lookout for animal life and, least of all,

squirrels. Yet it was not a minute later that Sharsmith gave a shout and pointed excitedly at a little gray form dashing across a rock in front of the party. "Look—a Douglas squirrel!"

One of the would-be mountaineers who was still a bit shaky from his previous rope-work blinked unbelievably. He looked at the squirrel, then down at the precipitous ridge he had just climbed. "Gosh!" he exclaimed, "how'd he get up here without a rope?"

(Editor's Note—This observation was made at about 12,500 feet elevation, which is 1500 feet higher than the Douglas squirrel is usually found in Yosemite National Park.)

CALIFORNIA SPOTTED SKUNK

L. F. Hosbrook, 1931 Nature School

In the September, 1931, issue of Yosemite Nature Notes is a vivid and interesting account of a family of spotted owls which were for a while this summer steady visitors to Fern Spring, near Pohono bridge.

On the night of September 13, at

8:45, Ranger-Naturalist Arthur Stupka and the writer made a trip to Fern Spring, hoping to catch a glimpse of these interesting birds. When the flashlight beam was thrown on the spring it revealed an animal making a hasty withdrawal—not our much-looked-for owl, but a spotted skunk (*Spilogale phenax phenax*). It was traveling up the slope and through the underbrush at a laborious and somewhat uncertain pace.

We followed in order to get a closer view, but after obtaining only fleeting glimpses of the white tail-spot as it persistently retreated, we lost track of it, and not wishing to

press too closely the pursuit of our aromatic object, we returned to the spring. On the water surface were a number of water striders. No other animal life was visible. Judging from life habits of skunks, it is most probable that this animal was not tempted to the spring by a drink of cold water, as were the owls, but had been attracted by the water striders and other insect food which is so often abundant near a pool of fresh water. This spotted skunk is the first one to be reported in Yosemite Valley this year. They are quite scarce at this altitude, but are common in the lower foothills.

A Battle for Life

RANGER-NATURALIST A. E. BORELL

While hiking with a party in Little Yosemite Valley late in July of this year we had the rare opportunity of watching a battle between a garter snake and a blue-bellied lizard. An 18-inch garter snake (*Thamnophis*) was fighting for food while a medium-sized lizard (*Sceloporus occidentalis*) was fighting for its life.

A rustle in the leaves attracted our attention to a snake which had just seized a lizard by one hind leg. Both remained motionless beneath a manzanita bush for a few moments. Then the snake began to work its mouth up over the lizard's leg. Waking up to the fact that it was being swallowed, the lizard made a violent effort to escape. The two of them rolled over and over among the leaves and when they were again quiet we found that the snake still held the lizard's leg, but

the lizard also had a secure hold on the throat of the snake. They remained quiet for some moments, then we carefully picked the snake up by the tail and placed the two in the open trail. The snake soon released its hold, but the lizard did not. This presented an unusual sight, a small lizard holding a comparatively large snake securely by the side of the throat. Suddenly it released its hold and instantly raced full speed for the protection of the nearest thicket.

The snake hesitated a few seconds, then crawled slowly away, undoubtedly feeling (if a snake has feeling) that it had made a very bad job of getting a meal for itself.

Thus ended a struggle for existence between two forms of our wild life, the like of which we seldom have an opportunity to witness.

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Activities of the Yosemite Naturalist Staff

C. A. HARWELL
Park Naturalist

The Yosemite Museum and naturalist staff had the largest response of their history during the summer of 1931. It seems visitors to our national parks have formed a regular habit of inquiring about ranger-naturalist trips and lectures upon their arrival, because the response has been more unanimous this summer and the service more appreciated in Yosemite than ever before. A comparison of the 1930 and 1931 figures is of interest. During the summer of 1930 we conducted 21,523 people on our guided field trips and lectured to 218,281 people, a total of 239,804 people. During the same period in 1931 we guided 18,502 afield, lectured to 226,018, a total of 244,520, which shows quite a healthy increase in visitors contacted through this type service. There was a good increase in the number who visited our museum on the floor of the valley.

AT MARIPOSA GROVE

The new Mariposa Grove Museum proved a real attraction. It served exceptionally well as a headquarters for naturalist efforts in the trees. The smaller trailside exhibits, especially of wild flowers set up at Glacier Point outlook and Tuolumne Meadows ranger station, proved very useful. The addition of fresh exhibit material to our museum collections and especially the live Indian exhibits furnished by members of our local village of Indians were the main factors accounting for increased interest in our museum and the increased at-

tendance. The following staff of naturalists and ranger-naturalists served for longer or shorter periods in carrying out this program during the summer: C. A. Harwell, park naturalist; C. C. Presnall, junior park naturalist; Mrs. Ruth Casaday, librarian; Alta Andersen, secretary, and the following ranger-naturalists: Baylor Brooks, San Diego; J. F. Burgess, Manhattan Beach; A. E. Borell, Berkeley; C. C. Jensen, Berkeley; Enid Michael, Yosemite; C. H. Oneal, South Pasadena; H. E. Perry, Los Angeles; C. W. Sharsmith, Los Angeles; Lloyd Sweetman, Sacramento; J. C. Shirley, Berkeley; B. A. Thaxter, Portland, Oregon; Paul J. White, Long Beach.

DEER IN A CAVE

Ranger-Naturalist A. E. Borell

It is easy to imagine bears, pumas, or skunks in caves even though we may never have seen one there, but a deer in a cave seems quite out of place. I was therefore somewhat surprised, as I walked along the bridge path below the old village, to see an adult doe bedded down in a large cave. A large rock which had fallen down over two smaller rocks formed a cave about eight feet wide and 10 feet deep. The opening was considerably smaller than the space within and the deer was lying with her head about six feet from the entrance. She was again seen in the same cave twice the following week, showing that this was her regular retreat when not foraging.



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Dan Anderson