

# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES



Sky Pilots  
*Polemonium confertum*

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# Yosemite Nature Notes

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## Museum Wildflower Garden

By Ranger-Naturalist Enid Michael

The Museum Wild Flower Garden has been in full bloom for the past six weeks and promises to continue in fine color till the silent snow flaks fall. As early as the first of May there was beauty in the garden. It was then the high mountain columbine (*Aquilegia pubescens*) reached full bloom. The columbine plants had been given to the garden by Ranger-naturalist, Adrey Borell, who had taken them from Mt. Dana at an altitude of 11,000 feet. The first great bloom of the plants was thrilling. The flowers were very large and of several colors, white yellow and blue. Interesting to note, the most admired blue columbine is again in bloom at the present writing.

By the middle of May the garden marsh and a streams de became bright with flowers of Shooting-Star (*Dodecatheon jeffreyi*), Alpine Lily (*Lilium parvum*), Blue

Camas (*Camassia quamash*), Knotweed (*Polygonum bistortoides*), Marsh Gold (*Phalacroseris bolanderi*) and darling white violets (*Viola blanda*). Among these early blooms were a few rarities: The Mountain Lady Slipper (*Cypripedium montanum*), Phantom Orchid (*Cephalanthera austinae*), and *Clintonia unifora*.

The last days of May and the first days of June brought almost daily rains to Yosemite. For the wild flower garden this was a great blessing after an almost snowless winter. When, at length, the storms were over and sunshine warmed the moist earth the whole garden seemed to smile. The eager plants could wait no longer and the great spring bloom was on. Along the stream cardinal *Mimulus* blazed forth in orange red, hedges of Meadow Lotus with yellow and white pea flowers, gayly born, and background

masses of Sierra Lupine glorious with wands of purple bloom. Many a graceful scarf of *Collinsea*, purly white, contrasted with the purple folds of fluffy-headed *Monardella*. *Eriophyllum* gathered here and there in golden pools. The flame of tall Indian Pa'nt Bushes, the charm of curious Cone Flowers, and a golden expanse of Brown-eyed Susans all contributed to the joyous spirit of the garden. The next great wave of color was brought by the bloom of our wine purple *Godetia* (*Godetia viminea* var *incerta*) that came to bask in the deep heat of long July days.

July passes with unclouded skies and the garden, cuddled upon the aluvial fan at the base of Indian Canyon, has the full glare of the summer sun and added to this, the reflected heat from the hot north wall. The furnace-like atmosphere can not dim the gay spirit of the garden. Mints, figworts, balsams perfume the air with their mingled breath. And the ever cheerful brook laughs and sings its way over the roots and stems of its plant lovers.

The fame of this garden has gone abroad. Bird and insect have heard the rumor. Four species of hummingbird gather: Anna, Calipe, Rufous, Allen; soon they are golden-browed from their forays upon the mimulus bloom. Goldfinches dance among the Evening Primrose stalks. Blackbirds, tanagers, grosbeaks, woodpeckers, robins and

others gather at the feeding tables beside the coffee berry bush. Always here are piles of hotcakes and other bread supplied every day from the Government Mess.

All warm July days come at length to an end. The sun retires behind Eable Peak, the Museum door closes, the *Godetias* fold their petals, the garden is at rest. All day long the tall Evening Primroses have stood unnoticed, for rests upon the garden a change their flowers are faded, their buds tightly closed. As a cool shadow comes over the Primroses. They seem to stand taller, their buds to stir. Their hour has come. In the gathering dusk their wide eyed flowers awake. And over the whole garden silently sweeps the enchantment of their yellow bloom.

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#### RARE COLUMBINE BLOOMS IN MUSEUM GARDEN

(By A. E. Borell, Naturalist)

The beautiful red Columbine (*Aquilegia truncata*) is always a main attraction in any floral display. But when it grows beside the high mountain Columbine (*Aquilegia pubescens*) it quickly takes a second place. Most outdoor people are acquainted with the common Columbine but only those who climb to timberline in the Sierra Nevada will see the Mountain or Blue Columbine growing in its

natural state. Here it is found in lushy clumps growing in the rock slides. The bushes are covered with large flowers of blue, purple, white, yellow and pink, or combinations of these. The white or yellowish phase seems to be the most common and the blue phase the rarest.

In the fall in 1932, I climbed the slopes of Mt. Dana to obtain specimens of this striking plant for the Museum Wild Flower Garden. It was difficult to remove the plants as I found that they possess long tap roots. In some cases, after removed as much as three feet of rock and earth, the tap roots were still as large as a man's finger. It was necessary to sever the tap roots and I was afraid that is a reason

the plants would not survive. They were packed in moist soil and wet sacks and brought to the Museum Garden which is 7,000 feet lower in elevation than is the place from which the plants were obtained. A mound of earth and rock was built up beneath an Oak in the coolest part of the garden, and the Columbines carefully planted by Mrs. Michael. In the spring of 1933, the plants came into leaf but did not look any too good and produced only a couple of small flowers. However, by this spring they had become accustomed to their new environment and put forth luxuriant foliage and a number of buds. By April 15, four of these buds had opened. Now (April 30), there are

35 flowers on this small group of plants and the number of buds indicate there will be flowers on these plants for at least two weeks more. Of course, here at this low elevation they are blooming about three months earlier than they would in their original home at timberline.

The largest flowers on the common Columbine in the garden are only 2 inches in diameter, whereas some of the flowers on the Mountain variety are 3½ inches in diameter.

In addition to the interest aroused by these rare Alpine flowers the large blue, white, yellow and pink blossoms are conspicuously beautiful.

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### BIRD OBSERVATIONS

(By M. E. Beatty, Assistant Park Naturalist)

#### ACarnivorous Jay

On May 11, near the Camp Curry incinerator, a Blue-fronted Jay was observed chasing a Meadow Mouse around and around the base of a tree. The jay would fly at the mouse, deliver a sharp peck and jump away before the mouse had time to turn and bite. After several minutes, the mouse decided to make a break for freedom. The jay taking the opportunity to deliver the death blow. The jay then proceeded to devour a great portion of the mouse.

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## The Sierra Primrose

(By Helen K. Sharsmith)

Class 1930 Y. S. F. N. H.

Of the many diminutive and hardy alpine plants to be found in the Yosemite region, the Sierra Primrose, (*Primula suffrutescens* Gray) is both one of the rarest and one of the most beautiful. Though familiar with many of the mountain tops of the Yosemite High Sierras, it was not until a recent trip to the summit of Cloud's Rest (July 8, 1934) that I made my first acquaintance with this imperturbable mountaineer of a plant. Only with the Sky Pilots (*Polemonium confertum* Gray var. *eximium* Jepson) of Dana is it to be compared in habitat, sturdiness and beauty.

Growing in the dry granitic soil among crevices of the summit rocks of Cloud's Rest (altitude 9924 ft.), small colonies of this plant are growing, its brilliant crimson-red flowers emitting a delicately exquisite fragrance. The shrubby low form of growth, like that of most alpine-dwelling plants, admirably fits it for the climatic rigors of a

mountain-top existence. The stems are prostrate and creeping, and densely covered by the spatulate leaves. This is the only species of Primrose we have in California, and it is also, according to Muir, the only species of the genus.

Though rare in Yosemite Mountains, this Sierra Primrose is quite frequent among the high peaks of the southern Sierra. Jepson in "A Manual of the Flowering Plants of California" gives the habitat and distribution as follows: "Crevices of rocks, alpine, 8000 to 12,800 feet, Sierra Nevada from Nevada Co. to Tulare Co." John Muir in "The Yosemite" speaks of finding it "in cool canyon nooks and on Cloud's Rest and the base of Starr King Dome". Hall in "A Yosemite Flora" gives Cloud's Rest, Mt. Huffman, and Mt. Dana as Yosemite localities. If it is still to be found on these latter two peaks it is rare indeed. In several trips to the summit of Mt. Hoffmann, and many trips up

the various sides of Mt. Dana, Ranger-Naturalist Carl Sharsmith and I have failed to discover even a single plant.

#### A NEW PLANT FOR YOSEMITE (Robert P. Beal, Ranger-Naturalist)

Yosemite is famous as a naturalist's paradise and while much has been written concerning the fauna and flora, new species are at times added to the list.

During the month of February while engaged in insect control work in the Wawona basin, near the junction of Alder Creek and the Merced River, I came upon a plant which reminded me of days afield in the wooded foothills and valleys of the Pacific Northwest. Beyond doubt the plant was a species of *Berberis* and quite similar to Oregon Grape. Investigation showed that the plant had never been reported within the Park boundaries though it was known to be common near Mariposa.

In the Wawona basin the plant is found to be in the Upper Sonoran Zone and is associated with Mariposa Manzanita, Digger Pine, Ponderosa Pine, Wedge-leaf *Ceanothus* and Mountain Mahogany. Here the plant grows to a height of two and one-half feet. The specimens observed have alternate leaves, pinnately compound. The leaflets numbering from seven to eleven are oblong and toothed; the teeth being

very prickly to the touch. The leaflets are netveined and are three-quarters of an inch wide and one and one-half inch in length. In color the foliage is dull grey-green.

Identification as to the species of *Berberis* was made by the botany department at Stanford University. The plant was found to be *Mahonia pumila* (Greene). It is commonly known as "Oregon Grape" to the residents of Mariposa county.

#### BIRD FIELD NOTES

M. E. Beatty, Ass't. Park Naturalist

##### Robin's Nest

Robins are among the first birds to raise their young in Yosemite each year and already a number of baby Robins have been observed learning to take care of themselves on the ground.

One pair of Robins chose to build their nest and raise their young amidst all the noise and excitement of the Camp Curry Automobile parking circle. They built their nest in the crotch of a small black Oak only six feet above the ground where cars are parking constantly all day long.

With four babies opening wide their mouths, the mother seems not in the least disturbed with the arrival of visitors. She is so tame that she will even allow petting and enjoys having the youngsters fed by the visitors.



## Rattlesnake and Cony

(By Raymond M. Gilmore)  
Ranger Naturalist

There is present in the Yosemite Museum collection, a certain large adult rattlesnake (*Crotalus confluentus oregonus*) and a cony (*Ochotona schisticeps muiri*); the latter was taken from the stomach of the former. The specimens were collected in Tenaya Canyon, 6500 feet, Mariposa County, California, on July 18, 1931, by A. W. Bell. The significant features of this set up are as follows:

The cony undoubtedly is an uncommon food item of the rattlesnake for the normal ranges of the two forms do not overlap.

In this case, the cony was out of its territory, in this region they are rarely found below 8,000 feet; the rattlesnake was near the upper limits of its range. The presence here of the cony indicates post-breeding peregrinations which may be responsible for the settlement of new colonies. No doubt, the several conies which have been seen in the

almost barren, granite summit of Half Dome represent wandering individuals which may or may not, permanently establish themselves in such an apparently inhospitable locality. No cony colony is known definitely to exist within six miles or two thousand feet of the place of capture of the snake.



The cony had fallen victim close to the locality of capture is indicated by its fresh condition, almost unaltered by digestive fluids.



## Helping the Sandpipers

(Ranger-Naturalist Enid Michael)

The whole thing seems uncanny. It is hard for me to believe yet, it really happened. It was that sort of rare experience which sometimes happens to thrill the student of the out-of-doors.

On a certain gravel-bar that I often pass on my way to the village a pair of Spotted Sandpipers had established summer quarters and occasionally wandered out on the gravel-bar to visit with the birds. On the morning of May 25th noticed one of the pair strolling among the roundly bunched sedges that dot the gravel bar. Perhaps the sandpipers had a nest hidden away at the base of one of the bunches. No; a close examination revealed no nest. To help the birds I chose the sedge bunch which appeared most suited to their nesting needs and with my heel I ground out a depression.

Twelve days later as I was again crossing the gravel-bar I noticed that one of the Sandpipers was agitated. This bird was bobbing and

teetering and prancing about as if laboring under some great excitement. I walked aimlessly past the bird without a glance in its direction and when some fifty yards away I circled about and came back to a point where I could look on unobserved. I had fooled the bird. He was not the least suspicious. He strolled carelessly about over the stony flat and settled at the base of one of the sedge bunches.

Cupped in the depression which I had formed with my heel and resting on a lining of dry grasses were three eggs. The conspicuously large egg of the three was peppered with dark brown spots on a field of blue gray. The two lesser eggs were peppered in a similar manner, but the dark brown speckles were scattered over a field of buff. The color scheme of the eggs closely matched the granite pebbles of the gravel-bar, in fact a little scouting produced three pebbles that matched up in size and markings.

What pleased me most with the



adventure was the fact that the birds accepted my suggestion as to where they should nest.

east of Yosemite National Park. The migration of birds is an interesting study and as time goes on we will learn more about these migrations through bird banding.

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**ROBIN MIGRATES FROM  
YOSEMITE TO IDAHO**

(By A. E. Borell, Act. Jr. Park  
Naturalist)

During the summer time robins are widely distributed throughout the higher and cooler sections of North America. As winter approaches they usually move south to warmer regions. In some areas, such as the Sierra of California, robins nest in the mountains and winter in the lower valleys, not necessarily going south.

Usually the winters in Yosemite are too cold and snowy to be suitable for robins. However last winter was so mild that many of them wintered here.

During February flocks of robins came to our feeding table which was located at 4000 feet elevation, New Village, Yosemite Valley, California. Many of these birds were trapped and banded. One adult male trapped February 21, 1934 was given band No. A 284813. This robin was not heard of again until Mr. Walter F. Campbell reported that a hawk killed May 25, 1934 at Sandpoint, Idaho, and he recovered the band.

Sandpoint is in Northern Idaho about 800 miles, air line, north and

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**YOSEMITE**

(By Samuel Thomas Beal)

Yosemite, the marvelous,  
Yosemite, the grand,  
Yea, the most wonderful  
Of any land.  
Your towering heights,  
Your granite walls,  
Your inspiring grandeur—  
My soul enthalls.  
With rapture and awe  
I observe your falls,  
Your mirrored lakes  
And glistening walls.  
When now I contrast  
Your placid state  
With the time of your making  
When the mountains did quake.  
By the mighty forces  
That were there at hand  
Moving and grinding  
At gravity's command.  
Then, after centuries, ages—  
Yes—aeons have passed  
The work of the glaciers  
Was done at last.  
Then behold Yosemite, the marvelous,  
Yosemite, the grand.  
Yea, the most wonderful  
Of any land.



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Dan Anderson