

# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES



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May 1936

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Volume xv

Number 5

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# Yosemite Nature Notes

THE PUBLICATION OF  
THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DEPARTMENT  
AND THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION  
Published Monthly

Volume xv

May 1936

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## The Muir of the Nineties

(By Theodore S. Solomons)

Many people knew John Muir in his old age, but there can be only a few living today who knew him in his early manhood. Between the two, there is a rapidly diminishing number of persons that knew him in his later prime, in his ripened maturity—in the nineties. Chief among these are Muir's younger associates of the Sierra Club, which I joined very soon after its organization.

Muir had been the leading spirit in the founding of this splendidly useful institution. He had realized the inadequacy of even his quickening pen to widely sow the public knowledge and arouse the public enthusiasm about which no complete protection could be secured for all that is humanly destructible in these fine mountains of ours. The Sierra Club was to be a chief instrumentality to that end.

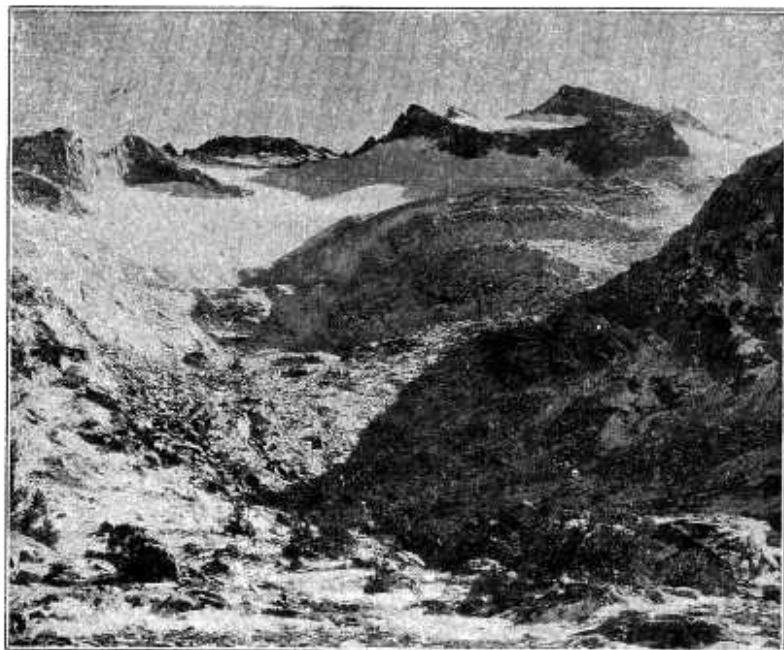
I first saw John Muir one afternoon at a directors' meeting of the club in San Francisco over forty years ago. David Starr, head of Stanford University, who also labored for love of the same cause, was a director, and several other eminent men from Berkeley.

The vivid picture I retain of Muir is that of a tall, spare man, in simple dark gray, a very plain shirt and collar, a tie as long and spare and wandering as himself, his slightly curly hair uncombed, yet not at all unkempt. He sat negligently in his chair, his blue, somewhat faded eyes never—it seemed to me—really focused on anything on which their gaze seemed to rest. He had usually little to say on the lesser or the fiscal concerns of the club, seeming to feel that his worldly wise associates could be trusted with these. Yet whatever the sub-

ject, whatever the talk, if his quick mind discerned a bearing upon his master passion of mountain preservation, the eye came back, and he spoke. He spoke in a natural, friendly way, never with ostentation of knowledge or superior experience, never with so much as a reminder of the stylist, of the frequently ornate stylist, that was the Muir of literature, but rather in the simple, homely fashion of the Wisconsin farm lad—for in many ways John Muir remained just that

to the end of his days. He spoke simply, I way, yet very shrewdly, as if he knew men by the same intuitive penetration by which he found sentiency in the forces of nature, almost in her very rocks. But even here—on the only "business" for which he was really fitted, the grave concern of mountain protection—he was usually brief and in manner exceedingly modest.

He was voluble only in his purely personal sphere as mountain man, nature sage. Here he talked



"Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees. The winds will blow their own freshness into you and the storms their energy. While cares will drop off like autumn leaves." John Muir

willingly, easily, showing the gleam of the fire of his unquenchable loves and enthusiasms never in manner—for in manner he was ever quiet—but in his eye, which lit like the tube of the radio, in a different timber of the voice, and in the length of his discourse—a length, however, that was never quite enough for his hearers. He showed it, too, in the quaint touches of a trenchant Scottish humor, and especially in an easy play of the fancy in simile and metaphor, a faculty so native to him, so linked with his interpretative genius, that it seemed an inseparable part of his thinking. Strangely enough, the use of figures of speech in his writing he found difficult, he told me. He has recorded that all serious writing was for him toil, and sometimes agony.

Though abundantly able, now, to relax the austerity that for years had been his way of living, Muir still seemed the ascetic. Only in his middle fifties, he bore the marks of self-imposed privation—of the days and night of hard, mountaineering toil on the pitifully slender ration of a little dried bread and a pinch of tea. He was to live some 20 fairly active years longer, yet already in face and manner—though not in movement—there was suggestion of premature old age. Probably those that had known him long did not see this. It was a thing for which youth has a quick eye.

Muir was exceedingly generous in his encouragement of us younger mountaineers. He realized that it must be by a younger generation that the Sierra was to be further explored and made known, though the older could still fight, as fight they did, for a wider and better preservation. He gave to us much time, and was patient with our fool questions. No doubt I asked him many during my several visits to the Martinez ranch where the lover of pure wildness in nature made himself content for most of each year with the quite tame pursuits of the fruit grower. A sunny, beautiful place it was, with a roony farm house with a kind of attic where Muir, in a comfortable confusion of books and papers and pamphlets and queer sheaves of notes, would stretch his length slantwise in a plain chair, or vertically as he paced the room, and describe for us, in his really fascinating way, the places he remembered of the places we wished to explore.

A truly great mountaineer was Muir, in the best and broadest sense, but by the standards of the geographic world a very poor sort of explorer. He could aptly describe every place he had seen, but you could seldom tell where it was, for he seldom oriented himself in his excursions, as he modestly termed his great journeys. The terrain was high and wild, and much of it blank on the so-called

maps and it was the normal thing to feel detached from all the greater landmarks of the surveys. Doubtless Muir found himself best when, in a map sense, he was most completely lost.

He was a determined man in his quiet, almost diffident way. For years the water ouzel had baffled him. This sprite of the waterfalls' spray had hidden her nests from him. He had looked and searched naturally in trees where, rather uniquely, they are not. He expected, no doubt, to look for them many

times more before he died, and never to find one. But a youngster might have fool's luck.

He accompanied me out into the driveway, adding a few more words of advice and admonition about my next plunge into the wilderness. Then for several moments he looked far away. "Don't waste precious time on it," he said, "but when you see the water ouzels"—there was a kind of dignified pleading in his voice—"do try and find her nest!"



**SPRING COMES EARLY TO  
YOSEMITE**

**M. E. Beatty**  
Assistant Park Naturalist.

The warm summer-like weather during March has had a prominent effect on both plant and animal life

to the extent that spring has arrived several weeks earlier than usual. On March 21, the Western Red-bud (*Cercis occidentalis* Torr.) was in full bloom in the vicinity of El Portal. Last year the height of bloom came around April 7 for this lovely majenta-colored shrub. Another flowering shrub in full bloom was the Buck-brush (*Ceanothus cuneatus* Hook.) with its ball-like white blossoms.

In Yosemite Valley, the Manzanita is practically in full bloom, which



is a very early record for this shrub. Snow Plan's (*Sarcodes sanguinea* Torr.) are reported in several places in the Valley and Big Meadows.

In the animal kingdom the hibernators are making early appearances. A California Ground Squirrel (*Citellus b. beecheyi* Rich.) was observed on February 20 and they have been quite common throughout March. Bears have been reported in several localities through-

out March. Reptiles are also appearing early. A rattlesnake was killed near Wawona on March 16, and a Coral King Snake was observed on the same date near Yosemite Falls. Blue-bellied Lizards have been seen scampering over the rocks in the warm sunshine throughout the month. Flocks of Robins and Red-winged Blackbirds are common and these birds, together with Juncos and Chickadees, are busy practicing their spring songs.

The ice cone at the base of the Upper Yosemite Fall has disappeared and the volume of water in the fall is increasing daily. All indications point to an early summer provided the weather does not undergo any great change.

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### MUSEUM SCIENTIFIC COLLECTIONS

(James E. Cole, Museum Preparator)

Editor's Note: This is the second and final article on the scientific collections of the Yosemite Museum. The first article, appearing last month, dealt with mammals, birds, amphibians, reptiles and fish. This article deals with insects, flowers, trees, fungi and miscellaneous material.

The insect collection contains the greatest number of specimens of any of the groups in the Yosemite Museum Scientific Collections. There are over 3,500 specimens of butter-

flies, beetles, ants, flies, etc., all identified and most all mounted. Three exhibit cases in the museum foyer display nearly a third of the assemblage where interested visitors have an opportunity to examine more closely the common forms seen in the Valley, besides learning something about the rarer kinds which are found at higher altitudes.

Practically all the insects are preserved dry. The majority are mounted on pins with outspread wings and stored in insect-proof boxes. The material in these Schmidt boxes, as they are called, is, in general, duplicates of species or closely allied species of those on exhibition. Although not available to the public because of their fragility, the insects can be inspected by anyone who applies at the museum office.

Some of the collection, such as water insects and spiders, are preserved in alcohol. Several specimens of the much discussed Black Widow Spider (*Lactrodectus mectans*) that have been collected in Yosemite are thus preserved and will be found displayed in the insect collection. The Black Widow Spider gets its name because of the habit the female has of eating the male, which usually is much smaller. For this reason not many males are seen. Consequently, Assistant Park Naturalist Beatty was somewhat surprised when he found one in the shop where Nature Notes are printed. The male, however, when

it has attained adult size, is not dangerous, and so need not be feared, although when young it is said to be as venomous as the same sized female.

Not all butterflies can be identified in the field, but anyone in Tuolumne Meadows region can quickly learn the Behr's Sulphur (*Eurymus behrii*) since it is the only greenish colored butterfly to be found there. The Behr's Sulphur has considerable local history interest. Previous to the opening of the Tioga road, practically all of the Behr's Sulphur butterflies known to science were collected by John Lambert, who homesteaded the Soda Springs section in Tuolumne Meadows, and after whom Lambert Dome was named. He kept the locality where he obtained these insects a secret, so probably made considerable side money by supplying the demand of what scientists considered a rare butterfly. There is an unauthenticated but interesting story that Lambert was killed by irate Indian braves when he refused to purchase the butterflies they brought at his request, and that the Indian squaws who buried him covered his grave with these supposedly rare insects.

Whether or not the contention is true that the nine-foot cross section of a Big Tree (*Sequoia gigantea*) makes the most interesting museum exhibit cannot easily be determined. Nevertheless, it does attract a good deal of attention. Few visitors

pass it by without examining it and reading the labels.

Another interesting tree exhibit is to be found in the tree room on the second floor of the museum. Sections of trunks of all the important Yosemite trees are displayed showing the bark characteristics and wood structure. In Riker Mounts above each trunk, examples of the foliage, cones and fruits of the trees are shown. A short study period in this room will enable park visitors to quickly learn the common trees they encounter around their camps.

Hanging on the walls of the auditorium, which is just beyond the tree room, are mounts of many common Yosemite flowers. Before the development of the Wild Flower Garden, these pressed plants helped visitors to identify flowers they observe in the Park. Now, however, it is no longer necessary to examine dried and faded specimens for the area directly behind the museum contains living representatives of most flowers that are seen by visitors.

The museum wildflower garden is unique in that it is not merely a floral display, but is designed to illustrate the various kinds of plant communities found growing at different elevations throughout the Park. In order to be of direct assistance to students of botany and others, communities are named and the important plants are labeled with common and scientific names.

It is estimated that there are ap-

proximately 1,500 different kinds of flowering plants in Yosemite National Park. The only scientific method of studying such a large as-



#### Sky Pilot

*Polemonium confertum* var. *eximium*

This lovely azure-blue plant is an alpine, growing above timberline.

semblage of plants is by collecting a number of specimens of each. When dried the specimens are mounted on standard size herbarium sheets and stored away until a sufficient number accumulate to warrant examination. Comparison of the same species from different elevations and habitats often results in interesting and worthwhile contributions to our knowledge.

Although not belonging to the pressed flower exhibit, part of the



fungi collection, nevertheless, is displayed in the same room. The mushrooms and toadstools exhibited illustrate many of the common varieties frequently seen near the trails in and around Yosemite Valley. No attempt is made to indicate the edible kinds for some poisonous fungi look so much like the non-poisonous ones that it is always unwise to eat any but those known to be safe.

Of the many species found in the Park, the Sierar Sculptured Puff-ball (*Calvatia sculpta*) is certainly the most strikingly formed. Instead of having a smooth exterior like most puff-balls, the surface is covered with long slender pyramids with recurved tips. Another specimen of different species is probably the largest of its kind ever collected. It is superceded in size by a puff-ball found in Canada that was over one and one-half feet in diameter. Our specimen is ten inches across.

The principal problem that confronts Yosemite Park Service personnel today involves meeting the challenge given by Congress when this area was set aside as Yosemite

National Park. Not only is this Park to be used and enjoyed by this generation, but it is to be handed on to the next and future generation unimpaired and in as near as possible the same condition as when given. Only by recording conditions as they are now, can the present Park guardians know whether or not they have fulfilled their duty. Thus, intensive ecological study on areas set aside for this purpose have been in progress for three years. The resulting reports present detailed descriptions of present conditions which can be checked any time in the future and our service found either wanting or satisfactory.

The scientific collections of the Yosemite Museum, in addition to the scientific data and specimens they contain, are inventories of the flora and fauna as compiled by this generation. Not only is it hoped that they will be used and enjoyed by the visiting public, but that they will serve as evidence of our regard for the preservation of the values inherent in these superb wildernesses and scenic areas known as National Parks.





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Dan Anderson