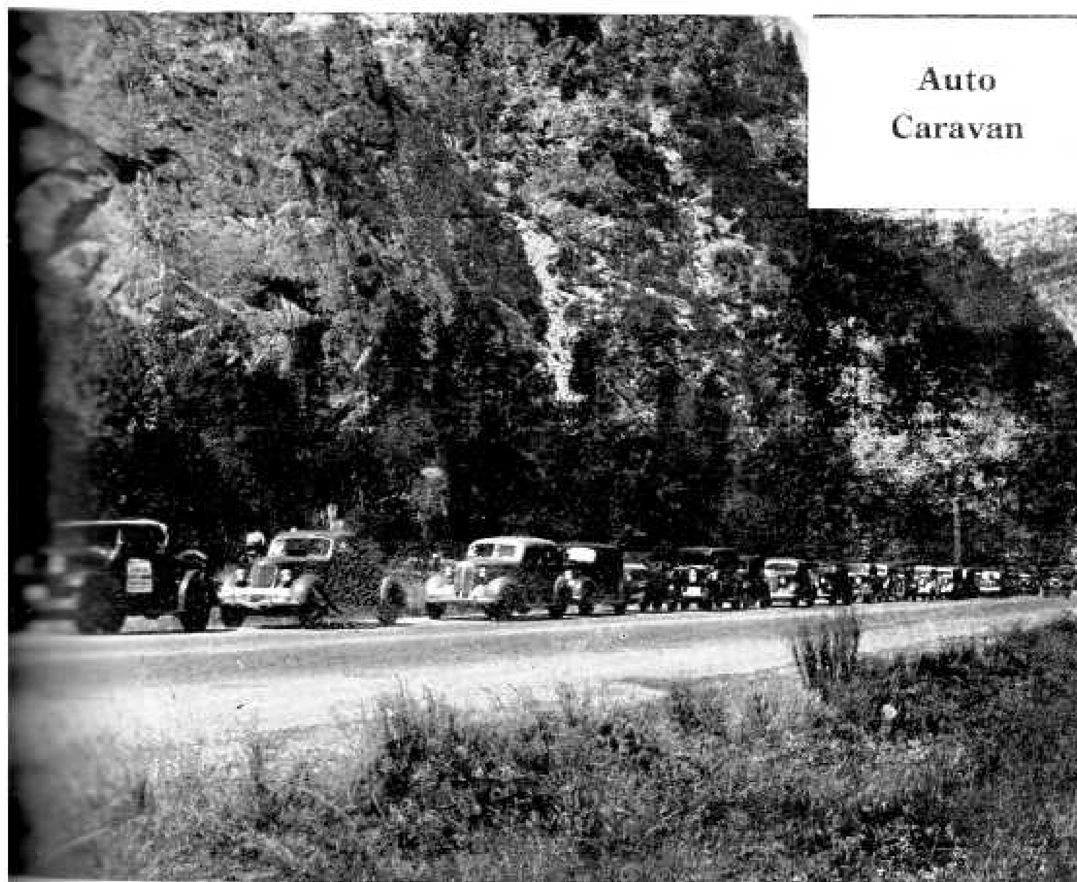
YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES



Auto Caravan

XVI August 1937 No. 8

Yosemite Nature Notes

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

Volume XVI | August 1937 | Number 8

From Beyond the Rim of Yosemite Valley
An Appreciation

By Carsten Ahrens Field School, 1936

It is an August twilight in the High Sierra. The members of the Yosemite School of Field Natural History have come to the close of another incomparable day spent on the roof of the West. Camp supper is over, and there is still an aroma of coffee in the air which blends agreeably with the odors liberated by the snapping fire of evergreen logs. The packers are hobbling the horses, and the cook is putting prunes to soak as we make ourselves comfortable about the great fire. Off come knee-high hiking boots, and toes stretch toward the cheering blaze. We have hiked and climbed eighteen miles today.

Someone begins to sing and soon the entire group is harmonizing cowboy ballads. One of the boys, wrapped in a vivid Indian blanket, leads an old Negro spiritual which the school has learned to love. Then another begins a Field School hymn which has been written to the immortal melody of "Londonderry Air":

Yosemite,
O land of cliffs and waterfall,
Of rock-bound purple lakes that calmly lie;
Yosemite,
Though distant we shall hear the call
Of wooded mountains reaching to the sky.
Like seeress old you weave a spell that captures us,
With birds and flowers and skies of sparkling blue,
Yosemite,
Though Fate may lead us far away,
We'll count the moments lost we spend away from you.

There is silence after this song. Behind the fire and completely

dwarfing the little group, rises the ponderous reaches of Mount Conness. A few days ago we stood on its very crest, at an altitude of 12,556 feet. All about us ranged wild country composed of bare, ragged peaks, wooded valleys, irregular indigo lakes—some of which remain frozen the year around—and dazzling snow fields.

But now we call our mountain, Count Conness, for he seems very aristocratic in the twilight, and the glacier at his throat might be his fancy ruffed white dress-shirt. Over to his left lies a great snow patch which in the distance seems to be a white gardenia in his lapel of his dark dinner coat.

About the camp-site are wind-worn, gnarled evergreen trees which the rising night breeze is turning into instruments that produce poignant music. Below the camp is the deep-blue, liquid jewel Saddelbag Lake, which reflects the pin-point stars that are working through the black bowl of the sky. They seem small and infinitely far away The wind rises; the high flame flares pennant-fashion, veering with the changeable air currents. Almost instinctively, each one of us move a bit closer to the fire, and this seems the signal for the discussion to begin.

All are students of Nature. Each is a specialist in plants, or animals, birds, insects, or geology; there is a photographer with us too. Each member has taken notes during the day on his particular interest and now is eager to share his discoveries with the rest. The botanists have found plants never before taken in the Park at this altitude. The zoologists have observed marmots, fawns of mule deer, brown bears and cubs, and a lone porcupine. The ornithologists have photographed the nest of an upland solitaire. The entomologists have found many species of insects perfectly preserved on the glacier's snow, and are at a loss to explain why so many swamp-loving lowland species should be collected on the shoulder of a mountain thousands of feet above sea level. The geologist explains the phenomena that have caused the amazing area we know as Yosemite National Park. Mr. Joe Dixon, Field Naturalist of the National Parks, deftly leads the discussion—his astonishing fund of information exceeding only his amazing modesty. Dr. Harold C. Bryant, Assistant Director of the Parks, has stopped with us for a short visit. There is about him a serenity, a calmness that has been acquired through years spent in places, distant from the hurry of the world. With him has come Park Naturalist, Bert Harwell, Yosemite's diplomat, artist, philosopher.

If only every boy or girl, man or woman in our county could spend a summer or even a few days in the spectacular splendor of the High Sierra, lectures on conserva-

tion would be unnecessary. It is gratifying to know that each year thousands of new visitors are coming to this unusual park, along with those who are lured back season after season. But when *you* come, don't be content or think you have seen Yosemite National Park when you have followed the splendid roads that circle the valley. True, Yosemite Valley is the most beautiful valley in the world, with El Capitan, the largest mass of exposed granite existing anywhere, darting upward a sheer three thousand feet from the valley floor—with Yosemite Falls leaping from its cliff to drop 2,600 mist-filled feet into the valley below. Take the zigzag trails up the valley walls to the 1,200 square miles of divine High Country—land of mountain peaks, glaciers, flower-filled meadows, clear icy streams and cascades—country that has hardly been explored. The National Park Service supplies guides if you wish to travel with the weekly party, or you may hire your own mentor if you are more exclusive. Perhaps one of us who is lying about this fire tonight on the generous lap of Mount Conness, will help you to know and love this rock paradise which is owned by the people of the United States.

But now the flames are sinking, and although the sun has disappeared behind Conness but a few hours, we are ready to crawl into the bed rolls. Tomorrow morning, when the red sponge of dawn drains the darkness from the east, we must be up and on our way. The pack animals will carry the bed rolls, food and supplies; the individual takes only necessary collecting equipment.

The flame has gone from the Council Fire; the livid coals change color with every gust of wind. It is time to sing the song which nightly marks adjournmen from the campfire to the beds under the friendly, fragrant evergreens.

"Goodnight, O Campers,
The day is done.
'Mid shades of evening,
We sing our song.
The pine trees whisper
A fond 'Goodnight';
Goodnight, O Campers,
Goodnight, Goodnight."

Discovery of the Tuolumne Grove of Big Trees

By John Adam Hussey Field School, 1934

"The most perfect and glorious sight that I ever beheld in nature's growth," was the verdict of the man who first made known the existence of the Tuolumne Grove of Big Trees in giving an estimate of his discovery to the world.

Just who was the first white man ever to gaze upon this small but noble group of redwoods will probably never be known with certainty, but the honor seems to belong to Joseph Reddeford Walker, who in 1833 with some thirty-five hardy trapper companions, made his way over the Sierra Nevada and descended into the San Joaquin Valley on the watershed which separates the Tuolumne from the Merced. In describing the journey through the Yosemite region, one of the members of the expedition, Zenas Leonard, in his famous Narrative, makes the significant statement, "In the last two days traveling we have found some trees of the Red-wood species, incredibly large — some of which would measure from 16 to 18 fathoms round the trunk at the height of a man's head from the ground."

These words are the first known reference to the Sequoia gigantea, but whether they mark the discovery of the Tuolumne, the Merced, or some other grove there seems to be no way of telling. During the years which followed, through the period of the Gold Rush and during the first few exciting seasons of tourist travel which followed the discovery of Yosemite Valley, it is quite likely that some wandering miner, hunter, or explorer of a new route to the "Great Gorge" happened upon the group of some 25 Big Trees which lies beside the present Big Oak Flat Road and is known as the Tuolumne Grove. If such was the case, however, the discoverer did not consider his find of enough importance to broadcast any great distance, for although the popular Coulterville Trail to the Yosemite passed through Crane Flat, scarcely more than a mile away, the redwoods seem to have remained quite unknown.

Historians of the Sierra have been rather vague in describing how and when the existence of this grove was revealed to a world

which was as interested in the wonders and novelties of nature as it is today. Most of them picture in glowing terms the figures who first described the Calaveras and the Mariposa groves, but about the discoverer of the Tuolumne Big Trees they have remained silent. John S. Hittell, upon what authority he does not say, in his little book "Yosemite, Its Wonders and Its Beauties," published in 1868, states merely that a party of Yosemite tourists from "Garrote" made the find on May 11, 1859.

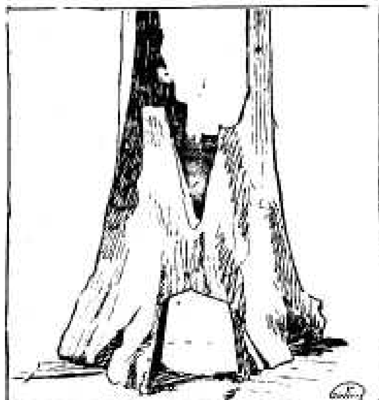
The whole story, however, comes to light in an article by Dr. J. L. Cogswell published in the Grizzly Bear Magazine for July, 1910. Dr. Cogswell states that he and eight friends made the discovery on the tenth of May, 1858, and adds further that upon that very day he took time to write to the "Weekly Bulletin," giving notice of the finding of a new grove of Big Trees. A search of the files of California newspapers of the day reveals that the San Francisco Daily Evening Bulletin for May 17, 1858, carried a letter signed by "Crane's Flat," giving details of the discovery. Although this letter shows evidence of having been written upon the party's return from Yosemite, it is in all likelihood the one referred to by Cogswell in his article in The Grizzly Bear. By combining the two accounts a detailed and interesting story of how the existence of Tuolumne Grove came to be known can be reconstructed.

On the eighth of May, 1858, a party of nine men left the little town of Garrotte, near Big Oak Flat in Tuolumne County, for a sightseeing trip to the Yosemite Valley. George E. Sprague was the organizer of the group; the others were Dr. J. L. Cogswell, Captain John B. Smith, Isaac T. Pray, Nelson Madill, David R. Bardwell, Robert G. Coffin, James T. Fisher, and Cornelius Tatton. The first day's ride brought them to Reed's Ranch where they camped for the night. The next morning they continued their journey, and after an all-day ride through magnificent pine forests they reached Crane Flat about dusk. As they entered the green meadow, one of the party observed a deer and shot at it. The animal was wounded, but made off into the surrounding trees. As it was too dark to follow the track, the men postponed the chase until the next day and picketed their horses for the night.

After breakfast on the morning of the tenth, the party set out on the trail of the wounded deer. The track led them north up the hill from the head of the Flat, and then, topping the rise and keeping the chaparral to the left, it brought them a quarter of a mile down the opposite slope. Still intent upon the chase, the men suddenly came upon a group of about ten magnificent Big Trees. The effect of the discovery is adequately described by Cogswell, who says, "we were so greatly surprised at the mon-

strous size, we thought no more of the deer."

That day Cogswell and his companions found about twenty trees. They were particularly struck by a giant redwood whose insides had been hollowed out by fire. This tree, which they named "King Solomon's Temple," is now known as the "Dead Giant," and has a tunnel cut through it. For many years



stages used to drive through this passageway which, says J. M. Hutchings in his Yo Semite and the Big Trees (San Francisco, 1894), was the first ever cut through a Sequoia gigantea.

Two tall stately trees growing from the same root and joined near the base were inevitably designated as "The Twins" or the "Siamese Twins," by which name they are known at the present time. Of these Cogswell says in his letter to the Bulletin, "For beauty and symmetry (they) cannot be surpassed. They are perfect to a fault, and tower aloft at least 250 feet—some say 300 feet."

After spending the best part of the day revelling in the beauty of their new-found grove, the men returned to their camp at Crane Flat, where Cogswell lay down on his blankets and wrote the record of the discovery. The next day the men continued their journey to the chasm of the Yosemite.

That the party was really the first to make the grove known is shown by Cogswell's communication to the Bulletin in which he says of the trees that they, "I think, have never before been discovered, at least not to the knowledge of any inhabitant of that region." His view is corroborated by an article which, copied from the Mariposa Gazette, appeared in the San Francisco Daily Alta California on May 22, 1858, and read as follows:

> "We are informed by Mr. Roney, of Coulterville, that a grove of Big Trees was discovered the past week by a party of hunters from Garrotte, near Deer Flat, within a mile of the Coulterville and Yo Semite trail."

The writer of the article went on to prophesy that the trees, "from their proximity to the Coulterville trail" would be much visited. The truth of this prediction was very soon apparent, and the Tuolumne Grove almost immediately became a regular "sight" for tourists on their way to the Valley. As early as the fall of 1859 an author narrating his adventures in Yosemite could advise prospective

visitors that the redwoods would be easily found ,for he wrote, "The trail is very plain from Crane Flat to these trees, although," he warned, "the descent and ascent to and from them is rather laborious." * Thus was the Tuolumne Grove brought out from the darknes of the forest and its beauty revealed to an appreciative world.

* "The Great Yo-Semite Valley," in Hutchings' California Magazine, IV (October, 1859), p. 158.

A CORRECTION

In a note entitled "A Meeting with a Rosy Finch Family" which appeared in the June 1937 issue of Yosemite Nature Notes, a correction is necessary. Miss Georgia Ware of San Fernando, California, a member of the party which observed the Rosy Finch family at the Gaylor Lakes mining cabin, returned the following day to the cabin with her camera and ample time for close observation. She found the nest which had been occupied by the birds, but which the party previously had failed to find. In a communication to Mr. C. A. Harwell, Park Naturalist, she states: "I examined the nest and found it to be a neat little round structure made of dried grass and placed about ten inches back of the rock wall."

This information was just recently made available to the writer, after the June number of Nature Notes had been published. It is the first record, to our knowledge, of the use of a human habitation as a nesting site of the Sierra Nevada Rosy Finch.

Carl W. Sharsmith,
Ranger-Naturalist

THE WHITE HEART

By Enid Michael, Ranger-Naturalist

A heavy snowfall, such as fell during the winter of 1937, is joyfully received by the flowering tribes of the mountains.

Unusual color and richness of bloom come to the meadows. The d.y sandy slopes bring into the sunlight many treasures of the plant world that for years have lain with the earth. In the hanging gardens of the cliffs rare plants bloom.

The White Heart, Dicentra pauciflora, only blooms in the cliff gardens after very heavy winter snows. It was ten years ago, after a heavy snowfall, that Charles and I discovered that White Heart blooming along the Ledge Trail. Five years before Charles had found the White Heart blooming in the chimney which leads to the summit of Sentinel Rock. This was the first collection of this plant so far south.

The memory of these lovely flowers sent me up the Ledge Trail on June 13. After acsending the first 2,000 feet I came into the groves of Sierra Maple, Acer glabrum. Now my pulse quickened and leaving the trail I commenced an eager search. I soon came upon beds of fern-like leaves, those of

the White Heart. Then rounding a crest of rock I saw it in full bloom. Th plant nestled under a shelving boulder and mingled in a bank of fern. On slender stems the blossoms were lifted before the greenery.

Graceful and elegant, as a fairy in a bower of fern, was the delightful White Heart.

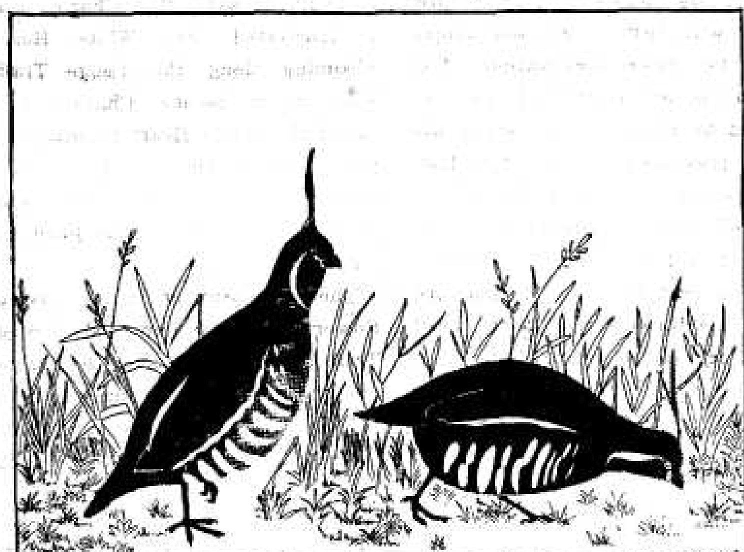
I carefully dug up a young plant and the next day planted it in our Museum Wildflower Garden.

HOW FAST CAN A QUAIL FLY?

By Ranger Lon Garrison

To the hunter, or the unwary mountain visitor who flushes one of our big Mountain Quail, the celerity with which they get off the ground and out of sight, seems miraculous. The question of their actual speed is something that is debatable, and on which I can offer some authentic information. In May, 1937, on the Fire Road to Spider Meadow, driving a Government patrol car, I surprised three adult Mountain Quail right in the road. Two ducked out to the side, but the third elected to outrun me. (He knew I had a Ford). I paced him for about 125 feet, and running, the quail was making 15 miles per hour, which should earn for him the undisputed title of "Twinkletoes."

Suddenly the quail darted into flight. Abruptly the speed rose from 15 to 25 miles per hour. At the change in rate, I dropped behind a bit, but at 25, held just even for about 50 yards. I elected to crowd him a bit to see if higher velocities would result, but he flashed to one side into the brush. I doubt if 25 miles per hour is maximum speed for these birds, but it is the fastest this one would go. Perhaps he was tired from his running.



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Dan Anderson