

# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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# Yosemite Nature Notes

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## Ta-bu-ce as a Weather Prophetess

By Ranger-Naturalist Ernest A. Payne

One rather warm morning during the middle of July 1936, I was talking with Maggie Howard, or Ta-bu-ce as we prefer to call her, as she sat making a beaded bracelet in her accustomed spot in the shade under the oak trees in the museum garden. In the course of the conversation which, at times, assumed the nature of a monologue with Ta-bu-ce listening rather passively, she remarked that the following winter was to be a very cold one. Being interested in the aboriginal method of foretelling the weather, I asked her how she knew and what were her reasons for believing the winter was to be severe. Without hesitating and with a tone that bespoke contempt for my ignorance, she replied, "Look at the acorns!" and continued with her bead work.

Not only did I look at the acorns that were appearing in abundance

on the black oaks over our heads and in all parts of the Valley, but I was also attracted by the number of cones hanging from the conifers. The sugar pines at Glacier Point and at the Mariposa Grove were especially heavily laden with their crop of long, cucumber-like cones which would mature in the autumn.

Ta-bu-ce could have said with equal accuracy, "look at the chipmunks and golden-mantled ground squirrels", for before the first of September these little animals were scurrying determinedly about in the Mariposa Grove with monstrous mouthfuls of fibers stripped from the bark of the Sequoia for their winter homes. So interested were they in the task at hand that the usual peanuts and cookies proved useless lures in distracting their attention. One golden-mantled ground squirrel actually wore a path from

its source of supply at the base of a red giant near our tent, to the entrance of its underground retreat. (See article by Ranger Lon Garrison, Nature Notes, July 1937, Page 55.

Many woodsmen and students of wild life place a great deal of faith in wild animals as weather forecasters, others look upon them with incredulity. Dr. Raymond L. Ditmars of the New York Zoological Park in his book "Strange Animals I Have Known" states that "There seems to be a deep-seated belief that animals are long-range weather prophets and anticipate extreme heat or cold by varying the thickness of their fur, care in digging burrows, storage of food, lining of nests and other activities.

"Year after year I have patiently watched for evidence that would indicate some creature's sensitiveness to coming change of season. Today I am convinced there is nothing to such a belief.

"True, the coats of fur-bearing and hairy animals do vary in thickness from year to year; and the activities of others in gathering winter food or preparation of their cold-weather domiciles may also vary. But the protective coats and the defensive toil seem to be influenced far more by the season through which the animal is passing than by anything to come."

Many times during the months of January and February when groping my way through the banks of

unpenetrable, oily smudge created by the southern California citrus growers to protect their crops from the frost, did I recall Ta-bu-ce's prophesy and her criteria for making the forecast. Again my visit with our Indian friend was brought to mind when official records of the government weather bureau showed that the temperature at Yosemite reached a low at 5 degrees below zero on January 21, 1937.

Is Ta-bu-ce's ability to anticipate weather conditions consistently accurate or was she just lucky in this instance? We do know that in some aboriginal peoples there seems to exist certain senses that we have apparently lost in the process of civilization. However, in the present case of Ta-bu-ce, her statement to be based entirely upon her observation of visible natural phenomenon and her criteria proved reliable.

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### AN ENTERPRISING JUNCO

By Ranger Jim Skakel

There are a great many ant-lion dens just outside our bedroom window. I recently observed a Junco hopping very purposefully from one to another, and making one quick peck in the bottom of each tiny crater. One might expect this of quail, but this source of food supply would seem to be a rather unusual discovery for a Junco to make.

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## Marmots

By Ranger-Naturalist Ernest A. Payne

One of the first observations we made upon reaching Tuolumne Meadows last summer was the apparent abundance of Sierra Marmots. The presence of these animals recalled to mind an article written by Dr. H. C. Bryant which appeared in Nature Notes for October 1929. In the article, Dr. Bryant discussed the scarcity of marmots in the Yosemite area and presented a number of possible explanations. One of the factors held responsible for their apparent disappearance was the normal periodic fluctuation in numbers or, in other words, the cycle of scarcity and abundance as found in almost all rodents.

In Tuolumne Meadows one of the most common inquiries of the park visitor during the summer was, "What is the large, reddish animal with a short nose and chunky body we see on the rocky slopes?"

On almost every naturalist-conducted trip we saw either the animal itself or fresh evidence of its presence. A great number of half-

grown young were observed cavorting playfully along the roads and trails and in the rock slides. In driving from Tuolumne Meadows toward Tenaya Lake on July 21, 1937, our attention was drawn to a moving form in the rock embankment at the roadside about two miles east of Tenaya Lake. We stopped the car and a half-grown marmot ran from its hiding place and made for the car. I got out and the little fellow was so fearless and friendly I could have picked it up in my hands. Another car approached and the animal became frightened and ran for safety under a convenient boulder. We waited a few minutes and watched this marmot join two others of the same size in a nearby pile of rocks. On July 8 a similar incident occurred approximately two miles west of the lake. This latter location must have been near the spot in which Park Naturalist C. A. Harwell observed the marmots mentioned by Dr. Bryant in the aforementioned nature note.

Mr. Albert Duhme, custodian of the Sierra Club Parson's Memorial Lodge at Tuolumne Meadows, reported that marmots were to be found commonly in that vicinity. Naturalist-conducted hiking parties found fresh droppings generally throughout the area in which the marmot is associated. At the base of Cathedral Peak, on the east slope of Mount Hoffman and on Mount Dana the evidence of its presence was abundant. Parties saw the animal at Glen Aulin, at Cathedral Lake, and several individuals were seen repeatedly on the talus slopes at the west side of Lumbert Dome.

On July 29, three individuals were seen by members of my party on Mount Dana. While we were eating lunch on the summit of the mountain (13,055 feet) a mature female appeared from among the rocks and seemed to beg for attention. Lunch scraps of bread crusts and fruit were tossed to her, to which she responded immediately. She grasped each piece in her fore-paws and sat comfortably, squirrel like, on her haunches until it was devoured, then she would look expectantly toward the group for more food. We were able to get within two or three feet of the animal and, I am sure, if we had had time she could have been persuaded to take food from our hand. During the hour and a half we were on the summit the marmot scampered from rock to rock just outside the circle of lunching hikers with cau-

tion but no apparent fear.

It was in 1929 that Dr. Bryant's observations were published, and with the evidence for 1937, we wonder if the apparent increase during the past eight years would not support his belief that 1929 or thereabouts marked the low ebb in marmot population and that we are now experiencing the upward swing in numbers approaching the period of abundance which he suggested might occur.

If this is the year of maximum numbers, or if it is approaching that period, would we not be justified in expecting an increase in our carnivorous mammals and raptors that are predatory upon the marmot and contribute to the maintenance of that natural balance which exists between the rodents and their carnivorous enemies. At any rate, we should be prepared for the typical cyclical diminution in numbers which will probably be manifest within the next two or three years.

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### UNICORN BUCK

By Ranger Lon Garrison

September 16, 1937, a four-point buck mule deer, killed on O'Connor's ranch west of Yosemite, checked through the Chinquapiin Ranger Station. The most conspicuous feature of the finely antlered head was the presence of a third horn. This was a stub about four inches long growing directly out of

the top of the forehead between the other two antlers. It pointed straight out, except for a slight upward curve. It was still in the velvet, but two knobs on the end indicated that it was slightly forked. The other antlers were free from velvet, and in good combat condition. The existence of bucks having a third antler is very rare.



This recalls the occurrence of "Old Horny" the "rhino buck" well known in Yosemite some ten years ago. He sported an extra horn which sprang from a point about one third the way between the tip of the nose and the antlers.

#### OBSERVATIONS ON THE TOWNSEND WARBLER

Ranger-Naturalist Lowell Adams

On the morning of August 23 at 8:30 o'clock a Townsend Warbler

(*Dendroica townsendi*) was observed in the Museum Garden. When first seen it was standing in a small stream of water that crosses the garden path, where it seemed to be taking a bath. Frightened by the sudden appearance of the observer, the warbler flew directly into the lower foliage of nearby ceanothus shrubs and disappeared. Although the period of observation was short, sufficient time was had to make out clearly the showy yellow breast of evening primrose hue and the striking black and white mottling of the wings and back.

It is interesting to note the distribution of this species which occurs at one part of the year or another over most of the North American area west of the Rocky Mountains, yet fails to grace the Yosemite region with its presence except as a transient. Dawson in *Birds of California* gives the general range of the Townsend Warbler as follows: Western North America. Breeds from Prince William Sound and the Upper Yukon, south to Washington and western Montana; winters regularly from central California to Guatemala, and sparingly north to Puget Sound. Migration includes western Texas and several of the Rock Mountain States." As a winter resident of California the distribution according to the same author is "—west central California; of regular occurrence from Marin County south to Santa Barbara Islands. Also a

common migrant through southern and interior California."

There is a possibility that these warblers may have regular habits that determine the time and route of migration of individuals or groups of that species, in which case we might expect to find them appearing in Yosemite at definite times of the year. With present records, however, it is impossible to define any such habit patterns. Grinnell and Storer in *Animal Life in Yosemite*, for instance, record Townsend Warblers in May (May, 1915 at Pleasant Valley and May 1916 at Mono Post Office), while Mrs. Enid Michael observed one December 1929 in Yosemite Valley. Again on August 21, 1937 Mr. Sid-

ney B. Peyton, Secretary Cooper Ornithological Club of Southern California observed them along the Nevada Fall Trail. Thus we have records for May, August and December. And that, of course, is insufficient data upon which to base any conclusion. Grinnell and Storer are of the opinion that "numbers of the birds undoubtedly pass through the foothills in both spring and fall", in which case the individuals seen at higher elevations were perhaps only wanderers from the regular migratory course. It will be interesting to note as more observations are made whether we have in this beautiful warbler a regular visitor or merely a casual wanderer.

## Home Life on Yosemite's Summit

Ranger-Naturalist Lowell Adams

As fall months draw to a close the various species of Yosemite Valley animals are putting the final touches to their respective preparations for the coming winter. But already the cold snow and frost have taken their stand at the higher altitudes; and the hardy denizens of that long Arctic-Alpine winter, having ceased their seasonal preparations, are now living snugly in their various retreats on the bounty of their providence. One is reminded of the picturesque little conies. Their method of wintering by means of hay-pile pan-

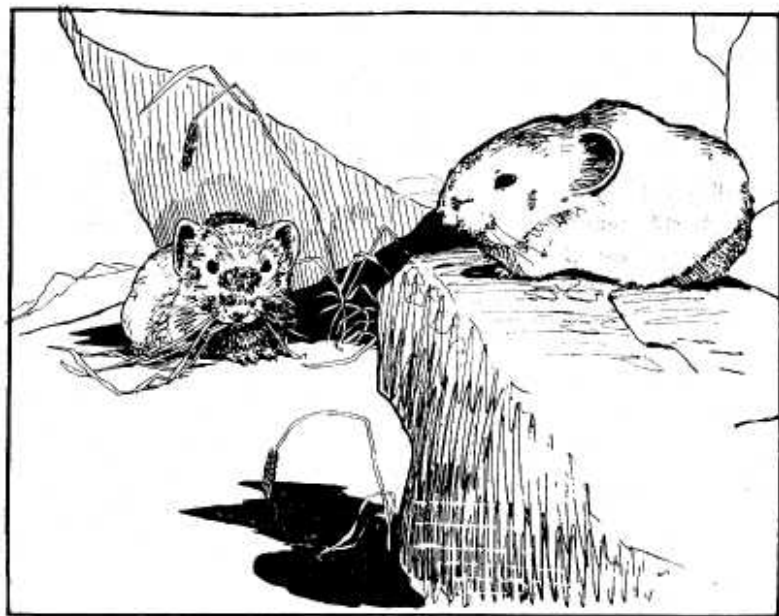
tries is well known. Many days are spent each autumn in cutting down the plant growth that occurs in the immediate vicinity of the cony's home. The plants are carried in large mouthful-sized loads to a shady, well aerated nook beneath some protecting boulder and there left to cure. One such pile of curing hay was observed near Mt. Lyell base camp at 10,300 feet during the glacier survey last year. It was conspicuous because of the noticeable lack of grassy plants in its composition. So often in studies of Cony habits the observer is unable

to list the plants of the hay pile because of the difficulty of classifying grasses. But in this case all but two of the plants were identified at least as to genus. Besides the unidentified single grass and mossy plant there were: *Spiraea densiflora*, *Monardella odoratissima*, *Bryanthus breweri*, *Phlox douglasii*, and a species of *Senecio* and *Eriophyllum*. Altogether there was about a half bushel of this material. In addition there was a small amount of old hay that had been left over from last year's over-supply.

Apart from the interest in the composition of this hay-pile it was

especially striking because of its strong, fragrant odor. The latter was furnished by the Pennyroyal in particular combined with a general aroma of properly curing green foliage.

Wise little conies! After inspecting their bountiful supply of intoxicating fragrance one is forced to respect them for their well-ordered means of subsistence in spite of adverse living conditions—to envy them their luscious pantry—to wish them all success for many winters to come. May their enemies, the weasels and martens, be not too numerous!



Conies at work making hay.





## Wooden Windlass

By Ranger-Naturalist M. D. Bryant

A year or so ago a piece of wood wedged between two trees was called to my attention. Inspection showed the condition to be man-made so I decided to find out why the piece had been placed there. I questioned a number of the "old-timers" and finally found the answer, thanks to Mr. John Degnan.

Early in the '70's a Mr. Westfall decided to construct a cattle slaughtering pen on the margin of the El Capitan meadow. The corral wall was built of stone, portions of which still remain. In the center of the pen were two trees much larger than the others in the vicinity. One was a black cottonwood and the other a ponderosa pine. The piece wedged between the two was ponderosa pine. Holes about one inch in diameter were bored through the crosspiece, rods were placed in the holes, and the animal was drawn in by the improvised windlass.

At the present time the cottonwood is 29 inches in diameter and has a 4-inch growth over the end of the crosspiece. The ponderosa pine is 31 inches in diameter and has a 2 inch growth over the end of the obstruction. The exposed portion of the cross piece is 4 feet long and its wood is firm externally but badly decayed around and within the holes.

This windlass may be seen to the north of the road as one drives down the valley toward El Capitan. It is even with the Y formed by the junction of the two roads leading to the El Capitan bridge from the north. I usually tell the members of the auto caravan about the relic and have found them always interested. So I pay my respects to an object that connects the present with the past and consequently will have increasing value until Father Time shall crumble it to dust.



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Dan Anderson