

# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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# Yosemite Nature Notes

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## THE LEGEND OF EL CAPITAN

As told by Chief Le-mee\*

What you white people call El Capitan, we Indians call To-to-kon-oo-lah. This valley was once all level. Two deer lived here, and they were having a game of football down in the plains. The salamander wanted to marry two sisters—two does, and he took the nephew, Pechanto, the little lizard, along. On the way to see the does, the little lizard got tired and thirsty, but its uncle wouldn't pay no attention to him. He was busy. He was thinking about the two does. The little lizard he kept a singin' his wish song. So the salamander told him that he would take an arrow from his quiver (huta) and stick it in the ground, and he told him to lay in the feather. He says if anything happened to him the arrow would bleed. Then he told the lizard to take the arrow and put it under his arm, and take it back where they came from, and that he would go on.

Meanwhile, all the people had already gathered in the plain. But they didn't know where they were going to find any ball, and so the salamander he came, and the two does told him to come close to them

so they could feed him, but he was so bashful that he says, "No, you bring the food over to me."

He kept agittin' closer; finally he got here. So the two does grabbed him, and tied him up in a ball.

After they had the ball, they went to work and picked out different animals that was good and bad: Blue-jay, he steals; he was no good. Woodpecker, he makes holes in the tree so the ball get lost—put him one side. And the crow, he is no good—he eats dead things. Buzzard he is no good—he eats dead things, and they don't want him in the ball game. Gopher he makes holes; he is no good. So they went to work and they took two moles that were brothers, and told them to watch for all the holes, and to cover them up, so the ball wouldn't get lost. They kicked the ball, and the ball went north; came back again; went south, and it got lost.

The moles had missed one hole that was under a manzanita bush, and so this ball wished these two brothers bad luck. It followed them all over. So they ran day and night to get away from this ball. They

come up towards the valley here, thinking the ball wouldn't follow. When they got up here, they were tired, hungry, hot. One of them says, "Here's a pool of water. We'll go swimming here."

So they went in the water, and they said that they would lay on top of a big flat rock to rest. But they were so tired that they went to sleep, so this ball, the salamander, it was coming so fast it struck, and hit the brother, and busted, and the rock started to raise. One of the brothers woke up. He tried to wake his brother up, but the brother was dead, and he wouldn't wake. So he jumped. Then he went to work and gathered all different animals that could jump to the top of rock, that had risen very high, so they could bring down the dead brother. The lion, he jumped, but only part way up; bear he jumped part way; wolf, he was the furthestest one up. Lizard, he tried to climb the rock, but he couldn't make it. All this time the brother was crying and dancing at the foot of the rock, because he wanted his brother to be down.

The tool-tok (measuring worm) was in the meadow. He saw all these people gathered, and wondered what they were doing. He went up, and he asked what they were doing, but nobody paid any attention to him. He kept a-asking and a-asking, and finally somebody said that this mole was dead up on top of this rock, and they wanted somebody to go up there, and get him down. When he said that, Tool-tok said he could climb that

rock, but they said that he was too small. They walked over Tool-tok, and kicked him around, but he didn't give up, and he kept a-asking them if he could go up there.

They said, "Look at these big people here who could jump, and what could you do?"

The measuring worm said, "I'm the one that climbs, and I climb this rock. I sing a song. Let me try to go up there, and see what I can do."



So he climbed. He singed his chant: "Tool-tok, tool-tok," etc. So he climbed. He got up there pretty near the top, and he fell, and all these people were watching him. The measuring worm says to himself, "Now, I told these people a story, and they'll never believe me. What shall I do?"

He stayed a day and a half, and he climbed up the rock zigzag. Fin-

ally, he got on top, and he hollered that he couldn't find anything. Then he found one bone. That's all he could find. And he went to work, and gathered different manzanitas and things that grew on top of this rock, and made a big bundle out of it. And then he told the people down below that he was going to roll it off. And the brother that was down below, he cried that much more harder. (Chant). And so this bundle came down so hard it made a noise, a whistling noise, and they all watched. When it got down pretty near the bottom, it came alive; flew, and turned into a burrowing owl. Tool-tok was so tickled and happy, he was going to show them what he could do. He stretched himself across the canyon; pulled

one of the Cathedral Rocks down. If he didn't do that there would be



a rock clean across the canyon from El Capitan to Cathedral Rock.

\* EDITOR'S NOTE: Chief Le-mee, whose American name is Chris Brown, is one of the local Yosemite Indians. During the summer months, he performs Miwok ceremonial dances in costume at the Indian demonstration program.

## BIOLOGY OF THE HIGH ALTITUDE POOLS

By Ranger Naturalist Verlin Baysinger

The rush of duties during the all too brief summer months limit true research endeavor for the naturalist staff. However, one cannot fail to see some of the outstanding exhibits of nature. Throughout the several seasons which I have spent in Yosemite National Park, I have been impressed with the possibilities of careful study of some of the lakes and pools at higher levels. Of singular importance, are the small pools of brackish water which form in shallow basins where the snow water accumulates.

Each of these pools is a microcosm that is one of the most compli-

cated of earthly environments, probably being exceeded by the ocean. The ponds are insignificant in area, but are rich in life. Quite often these pools afford conditions for only a transient existence of organisms. Therefore, they commonly contain life which has a very rapid reproduction and development; also these species would be adapted to carry through the period of unfavorable conditions.

These small water bodies are practically uniform with no zonation. In this way a single series of organisms is to be found inhabiting the environment. Floating microscop-

pic organisms might be boundless, being dependent on many factors, and would consist of vegetable and animal type. These organisms would make the biologic environment that permits the growth of a larger variety of life.

A short visit to a pool at an elevation of 9300 feet and located near May Lake, revealed a fascinating picture and a host of forms. Upon approach the first evidence of life was intimated by the splash of a frog as it dove into the water. Soon a garter snake was observed swimming after a group of tadpoles among which were several beginning to develop their legs. Further activity was exhibited by the whirligig beetles whose erratic courses were crossed by the light-footed water striders. An occasional diving beetle would come up for his bubble of air, and return to the bottom. The water boatmen roamed about through the entire water depth with agility and ease. The hiking party was attracted by the leaf-like appendages of the transparent Arasthana, the well-known fairy shrimp. The pool seemed to be a massed exhibit of these phyllopod crustaceans. The whole exhibit was striking, and a momentary collection presented a species valuable to the museum collection. This specimen, a diving beetle, has been found at various lower levels; therefore, this is an indication of greater range.

North American scientists have a very incomplete knowledge of the

biology of our lakes. Much valuable work could certainly be done here in the undisturbed pools of the High Sierra where an unexcelled outdoor laboratory awaits the biologist.

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## WESTERN WARBLING VIREOS VS. BLUE-FRONTED JAYS

By Ranger Naturalist L. P. Parratt

A pair of Western Warbling Vireos (*Vireosylva gilva swainsoni*) had established their nesting territory some one hundred fifty yards east of the Sentinel Bridge on the south side of the Merced River.

On June 24, 1940, attracted first by their sweet, warbling notes and then again by harsh, hissing notes along with the strident call of a Blue-fronted Jay, I noticed the pair of Warbling Vireos busily occupied in driving away a Blue-fronted Jay that had been poking around the willows near the water's edge. One after the other they would swoop down in an arc and pick at the back of the Jay while uttering loud, hissing noises.

A few days later, on June 30, another pair of Warbling Vireos went through the same performance in the area where Fern Spring empties into the Merced River. These tiny birds by their audacity and persistence both times drove away the "bully of bird land" who is many times their size.

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### RARE PLANTS IN YOSEMITE

By Ranger Naturalist A. L. Haines

During the summer of 1939, I had the good fortune to discover several plants which I had not seen growing before. Upon the identification of these plants it was found that they were each considered to be rare in the Yosemite region.

A cluster of eight to ten whitish asparagus-like shoots were found forcing their way through the thick layer of humus that surrounds the Texas Tree in the Mariposa Grove. By the middle of June these leafless shoots had reached a length of seven inches, and had become covered with numerous, small, white blossoms. One's first impression on seeing this plant would be that it is an albino Snow Plant (*Sarcodes sanguinea* Torr.), so much does it resemble the latter plant in general habit. This resemblance is not without justification, for it is in the same family as the highly regarded Snow Plant. This saprophytic herb was identified as *Pleuricospora fimbriolata* Gray. Several other clusters of it were later found in the upper portion of the Grove at an elevation of 6500 feet. According to Hall's Flora

of Yosemite, "this peculiar, thick-set saprophyte was found pushing itself up through the carpet of decaying pine and Sequoia leaves in the Mariposa Grove and near Wawona. It is reported from the Pohono Trail."

Darwin Tiemann collected a specimen of *P. fimbriolata* on the Pohono Trail near Bridalveil Creek during July, 1939, and it is now included in the Yosemite herbarium.

A mild winter in Yosemite results in a diminution in the beauty of the waterfalls and in the abundance of the spring flowers, but a summer visitor finds compensation in the fact that certain flowers are forced into blossom a month or more before their normal blooming period. One of the rare plants in the Yosemite region which was thus made conspicuous during the summer of 1939, was Grass of Parnassus (*Parnassia palustris* var. *californica* Gray.) Several lovely plants of this species were seen on Alkali Creek, near the Glen Aulin High Sierra Camp on August 3, 1939. Occurring on low gravel bars bordering the creek, this

saxifrage was easily identified by the slim, naked, stem terminated by a single, white flower that was made

attractive by the network of green veins in each of its five roundish, white petals.

## GUESTS OF THE EVENING PRIMROSES

By Ranger Naturalist Enid Michael

By the first of May, there is sunshine in the Museum Garden all day long, and the garden is warm by eight o'clock. Through the day the light becomes more intense and the garden warmer till in the late afternoon the sun approaches the wall of Eagle Peak. Then the light and heat commence to abate, and when the sun at last drops behind the great cliffs, a sense of coolness softly filters in. The warmth, that all day long has wrapped the garden in its confident cloak, reluctantly loosens its folds, and a feeling of rest breathes through the flowery vistas.

Now a new order of life commences to stir—the hour of Evening Primrose is coming on, and expectancy adds its stir to the charm of the cooling atmosphere. The Evening Primroses have slept all day, and the earth must be really cool before these queens of the twilight hour consent to open their pure flowers.

On certain nights the garden gate opens at half-past six, and by this time several blossoms have already expanded. With the opening of the gate, those who have been waiting come eagerly in, and gather about the primroses that are now ready to do their part.

The play of Evening Primroses is on: Moving smoothly, as though all

had been previously arranged, the calyx jacket of a certain blossom suddenly loosens, and after a brief rest, two of the calyx fingers fold down. With this the petals begin to stir, and the four-pointed pistil-tip



protrudes from the flower like a saucy tongue. Then, as the other pair of sepals relax their hold, with graceful movement the petals flatten out, and the perfect flower is in bloom. So quickly does it happen that people often say they can hear the blossom "pop."

Now come the guests, and the first is the Carpenter Bee. He pounces upon the flower, and grasping the stamens with his four, hairy legs, deftly packs the pollen in his leg pouches. In apparent excitement he

dashes from flower to flower, raking from the stamens their golden load. Next to appear is the Sphinx Moth, who noses down into the center of the flower as he probes the tube with his needle-like tongue. Meantime, the bee, with his pouches full and his legs fairly dripping with pollen strings, returns to the original blossom, and deliberately sits upon

the four-pointed pistil-tip. From flower to flower and from pistil to pistil he moves as though he performed a pleasant duty. Can it be that the Carpenter Bee has an agreement with the flower—that in exchange for the gift of pollen he will fertilize the pistil? Be that as it may, he leaves each pistil-tip dotted with a composite load of golden dust.

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### SOME UNUSUAL BIRDS IN YOSEMITE VALLEY

By Ranger Naturalist George A. Petrides

On September 1, 1940, Mr. Charles Michael, a long-time resident of Yosemite Valley and an amateur ornithologist who has contributed greatly to our knowledge of birds in this region, spent the morning with the writer in searching for birds. Due principally to Mr. Michael's keen powers of observation and to the tendency of birds to wander from the scene of their nesting activities during the late summer and fall, a number of bird species were listed that do not normally occur in Yosemite Valley.

Of the list of forty-one kinds of birds seen, at least eight species were of decidedly unusual occurrence. Of these the Western Tanager was present at an abnormally late date, while the Traill flycatcher, though normally here at this season, is not often observed. Of the remaining six species, three had descended from their more normal range above 6,000 feet elevation,

while three others had come up from below 3,500 feet. All were viewed in Tenaya Canyon, except the Rock Wren observed at Rocky Point, at an elevation of about 4,000 feet.

In the first group, descended into the Transition from the Canadian life zone, were the Olive-sided Flycatcher, the Green-tailed Towhee and the Rock Wren. In the second group, ascended from the Upper Sonoran to the Transition Zone, were the Nuttall Woodpecker, the Hutton Vireo, and the Bush-tit.

While birds wandering from their normal habitats are to be expected in unusual situations during the post-nesting season, normally these individuals travel to colder elevations or latitudes rather than to the reverse. On that basis, the occurrence of the Canadian life zone birds in Yosemite Valley was quite unpredictable.

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## AN ALBINO WOODPECKER

By Ranger Naturalist George A. Petrides

In July, 1940, at Tamarack Flat in Yosemite National Park, California (altitude approximately 6700 feet) an albino woodpecker was found dead by an enrollee of the Civilian Conservation Corps. Upon the presentation of this bird to the museum, an attempt was made by the author to identify its species.

Although the specimen had reached a rather advanced stage of decomposition, the structure of the bill and feet indicated almost certainly that this bird was a member of the genus *Dryobates*, but whether it was a Modoc Woodpecker, *D. villosus orius* Oberholser, or a

orange-red color. The bill and feet, lacking pigment, were of a pale pink coloration. Internal decay prevented an examination of the sex organs themselves, but the coloration of the head indicated that the sex was male. The cartilaginous nature of the skull, as well as the distribution of the color on the head, suggested that this was an immature individual—probably a young of the year.

The measurements of the albino woodpecker were: total length 8 3-16 in.; wing 4 3-4 in.; tail, 3 5-16 in.; bill, 1 in.; tarsus, 15-16 in. Similar measurements of the skins of three male and three female Modoc Woodpeckers and three male and two female White-headed Woodpeckers of the museum collections revealed no significant difference in size between specimens of the two species from this region.

Judging from the color of the crown patch, the heaviness of the bill, and the general build of the bird, however, it was concluded that the albino bird was a young male Modoc Woodpecker, *Dryobates villosus orius* Oberholser. It is now a specimen in the Yosemite National Park Museum alcoholic collections. The cause of its death could not be determined. The finder of this bird reported to Ranger Naturalist Vincent Mowbray that in August, 1940, another albino woodpecker had been observed in the vicinity of Crane Flat.



White-headed Woodpecker, *D. albarvatus* (Cassin), was somewhat more problematical. In general appearance the plumage of the woodpecker was entirely white except for the terminal portions of some of the feathers of the upper forehead and lower crown regions of the head. The tips of these feathers were of an



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