

YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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CALIFORNIA RING-TAILED CAT

Yosemite Nature Notes

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DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSPORTATION TO YOSEMITE

By C. Frank Brockman, Park Naturalist

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Part III—Transportation Facilities in the Park

It was inevitable that, once Yosemite Valley was made accessible, numerous individuals would seek to become more intimately acquainted with features that had previously been viewed only from a distance. So almost immediately after the first visitors began coming to Yosemite on horseback via the Mariposa, Coulterville, and Big Oak Flat trails which, by 1858, had been developed as standard routes of approach to the valley, public interest in the area pointed the way to many points which had been known only casually. Such activity continued throughout the years, resulting eventually in the development of more than 700 miles of trails which today make accessible most of the 1189 square miles of rugged Yosemite terrain. In addition, 235 miles of roads not only bring certain spectacular areas within easy reach of park visitors but, more importantly, serve to bring prospective hikers to "key" locations of the trail system from which additional and more extensive explorations may be made.

Original Trail System in Yosemite Valley

Attention was naturally first directed to the valley itself and those who were first privileged to see and explore it found their way about without benefit of trails. The level and comparatively open valley floor, coupled with its rugged, confining walls, placed specific emphasis on the more dramatic features that could be easily reached without too much difficulty. In that manner certain generally used routes to points of nearby interest on the valley floor came to be recognized at an early date. Thus, in the years that intervened between the visit by the first "tourist" party (1855) and the time when the State of California undertook the protection and administration of Yosemite Valley (1864) trails to Mirror Lake and Vernal Fall had developed. Although there is no indication of how or by whom these first trails were constructed one obtains the first authentic documentary picture of these facilities from the pages of "The Yosemite Book" pub-

lished by the California Geological Survey in 1868, which was the immediate outgrowth of surveys conducted from 1854-1867 in connection with the determination of the boundary of the Yosemite Grant. Two very excellent maps included in that publication—one of the valley, and another of the surrounding High Sierra region—disclose the extent of the meager trail system of that day.

Two hotels were then available in the valley—the "Lower Hotel," which occupied a site near the present terminus of the present Four-Mile Trail, and the "Upper Hotel," which stood near the present Sentinel Bridge. These pioneer hostelries were the natural objectives of the Mariposa and Coulterville trails, the two routes by which early visitors reached the valley floor. After descending from the rim, these trails followed up the valley on opposite sides of the Merced River to their junction below the "Lower Hotel," riders using the Coulterville trail being required to ford or ferry the river near the point now popularly known as Yellow Pine Beach. At the "Upper Hotel" the trail again divided. One branch crossed the Merced and followed up the north side of the valley to Tenaya Canyon, ending at Mirror Lake. The other branch continued along the south bank of the river to a point above Happy Isles where it crossed Illilouette Creek and ascended along the south side of the narrowing canyon to Vernal Fall. The present Mist Trail follows a portion of this route and for a number of

years a small cabin, serving as a toll station, was located at "Register Rock" near the present trail junction a short distance above the log bridge below Vernal Fall.



Since Vernal Fall is a popular present day objective for hikers, a reference to that route which appears in "The Yosemite Book" will be of interest.

"Leaving the Yosemite Valley proper . . . we follow up the Merced soon crossing the Illilouette . . . Rising rapidly, on a trail which runs along near the river, over the talus of great angular masses fallen from above, we ride a little less than a mile, and nearly to the base of the first of two great falls made by the Merced in coming down from the level of the plateau above into Yosemite Valley . . . The path up the side of the canon near the fall winds around and along a steeply sloping mountain side, al-

ways wet with spray, and consequently rather slippery in places. Ladies, however, find no great difficulty in passing, with the aid of friendly arms, and protected by stout boots and india rubber clothing brought from the hotel. The perpendicular part of the ascent is surmounted by the aid of ladders . . . From the Vernal Fall upstream, for the distance of about one mile, the river may be followed, and it presents a succession of cascades and rapids of great beauty."

In spite of the fact that "The Yosemite Book" states that Liberty Cap had already been climbed, thus recording the activities of a few unknown adventurous souls, the top of Nevada Fall was generally inaccessible since no bridge was available across the tempestuous Merced. Most visitors were content with a view of the latter cataract from vantage points on the south side of the river above Vernal. As to Half Dome "The Yosemite Book" states that it was

" . . . perfectly inaccessible, being probably the only one of the prominent points above the Yosemite which never has been, and never will be trodden by human foot."

Although this prediction was to be disproved in 1875, modern visitors viewing this distinctive granite mass for the first time generally feel the same way.

From "The Yosemite Book" we also learn that, with the exception of the Mariposa and Coulterville trails, no prepared routes gave access to points along the rim of the valley, although a number of early visitors occasionally climbed up Indian Canyon to the head of Yosemite

ite Fall and also up the gorge beside Sentinel Rock to get at its summit and to the crest of Sentinel Dome. Such activity indicates the interest that was manifest in these points at that early time, and paved the way for the development of means by which they would be made more readily accessible.

Trail Construction During Regime of Yosemite Valley Commission

In 1864 the responsibility for the care of the Yosemite Valley and the Mariposa Grove was accepted by the State of California from the Federal Government, and a commission for the administration of these areas was established by the California Legislature. The members of that body quickly recognized that certain improvements needed to be made as soon as possible. Units of the meager trail system had been constructed by private individuals and operated as toll routes and, in addition, toll was charged on the ferry that operated on the Merced River. This was a source of considerable nuisance and complaint on the part of early visitors.

The Commissioners took the first step toward the alleviation of this condition in 1866 when, with the small allotment of \$2,000.00 granted by the Legislature in its session of 1865-66, they not only paid the very modest salary of Galen Clark, the first guardian of Yosemite Valley, but also improved certain trails on the valley floor and constructed two bridges across the Merced. One of these spanned the river on the val-

ley floor at the Coulterville trail crossing and enabled visitors to avoid the expense and delay of the ferry; the other was built above Vernal Fall in order to make the top of Nevada Fall accessible. In the meantime, since no funds were provided for trail construction, the Commissioners embarked upon a program of granting toll privileges for a specified length of time to certain responsible individuals in return for the construction of some of the more difficult trails. In the report of the Commission for 1877 we find the following plea—

"With regard to trails within the grant . . . the Commissioners having no funds at their command, have always been ready to grant privileges for their construction when deemed advisable coupled with the right to collect a moderate toll during a period of ten years, or until such time as the Legislature saw fit to make the appropriation necessary for their purchase. In the opinion of the Commissioners, the time has now come when this should be done, and they would, with this object in view, respectfully request an appropriation for this special purpose of seven thousand five hundred dollars, as well as one thousand dollars additional for keeping them in repair during two years."

Further remarks in a similar vein were included in subsequent reports. These suggestions bore fruit in 1882 when the "Four-Mile trail" to Glacier Point and the ladders which gave access to Vernal Fall were purchased from their respective owners and made free. In addition rights to a number of the other existing trails reverted to the State at that time through the expiration of

their leases. By 1886, rights to all remaining trails as well as the portions of the Coulterville and Big Oak Flat roads which, in the meantime, had been completed to the valley floor, and which were within the boundary of the Yosemite Grant, were likewise purchased and made free to the public. Thus, 1886 was a memorable year in that it marked the final termination of all toll privileges on roads and trails within the Yosemite Grant.

Early Trails in the Yosemite High Sierra

Although the Geological Survey of California had roughly reconnoitred the Yosemite High Sierra in 1863, they made a more careful investigation of this area in 1866 and 1867. The interests and beauty embodied in this region are exhaustively treated in "The Yosemite Book" which gives us an excellent picture of trail facilities in the area at that time. That publication places particular emphasis on the possibility of a pack trip through this region, which figuratively raises the curtain on the High Sierra hiking and saddle parties of the present day. The route suggested, traversing practically the entire trail system in existence at that time, followed the Coulterville trail from the valley floor to the north rim where it joined the Mono trail. This route, originally used by the Indians and improved in 1857 by those interested in mining possibilities in the Sierra, ran east through the heart of what is now Yosemite National Park, closely approximating

The present Tioga Road, to Tenaya Lake and Tuolumne Meadows. From this point the return westward to the original Mariposa-Yosemite Valley trail (constructed by the Mann Bros. in 1856) was accomplished by means of a branch of the Mono trail, also an original Indian route, which crossed Cathedral Pass and passed through Little Yosemite Valley and Mono Meadows to Ostrander's in the vicinity of Perego Meadows on the present Glacier Point road. An improved trail, which follows the same route, and which is famous for its spectacular scenery and sunrises from Cathedral Pass, is in use at the present time.

The map included in "The Yosemite Book" also calls attention to the route from Ostrander's to Sentinel Dome which was blazed by the State Geological Survey party in 1864. It also indicates that the Mariposa Grove of Big Trees was accessible by trail from Clark's (Wawona) which followed a route that is approximately the same as that utilized at the present time, and notes that Hetch Hetchy Valley was accessible by trail from a point on the Big Oak Flat route between Sprague's and Hardin's, ranches which were located west of the present Big Oak Flat entrance of the park.

Valley Trail Development in the Seventies

Returning to a consideration of valley trail development, we find that the foundation of a major part of our present system was laid in the 70's, largely through the policy

of the Commissioners in granting toll privileges for trail construction. In 1870 Albert Snow constructed a horse trail from "Register Rock," at the start of the Mist trail, over the rugged shoulder which Clark Point is located, to the flat between Vernal and Nevada falls. Here he constructed a hotel known as "La Casa Nevada." The following year John Conway built a trail which ascended from "La Casa Nevada" to the top of Nevada Fall and Little Yosemite



Nevada Fall

from site of La Casa Nevada.

Valley. Hikers who use the route today will have cause to appreciate the labors in the original construction while ascending the numerous, steep and rocky switchbacks below Liberty Cap. John Conway contrib-

uted further to trail development in the Valley. Under the auspices of James McCauley, who later (1878) built and operated the Mountain House at Glacier Point, he began construction of the Four-mile trail from the base of Sentinel Rock to Glacier Point in 1871, completing this project in the following year.

Original notes made by John Conway (contained in the historical files of Yosemite Museum) state that a trail between Little Yosemite Valley, above Nevada Fall, and Glacier Point was constructed by Washburn and McCreedy in 1872. It followed the old Mono trail most of the way and thus made possible a loop trip from the valley by way of Vernal and Nevada Fall, Glacier Point and the Four-mile trail. This route is included on a map contained in "The Yosemite Guide Book" of 1874 (published by the State Geological Survey and successor to "The Yosemite Book"). However, indications are that this loop route was only occasionally followed until it was improved and shortened by the Yosemite Valley Commissioners in 1885. In that year the Merced River was bridged just above Nevada Fall and a new trail (called the Echo Wall trail) was built along the top of Panorama Cliff to the brink of Illilouette Fall. This route to Glacier Point, known for many years as the Eleven-mile trail, was further shortened to 8 $\frac{1}{4}$ miles at a later date.

In 1874 James Hutchings had a trail constructed up Indian Canyon. This not only shortened the distance from the valley to the Mono trail by which Tuolumne Meadows and the High Sierra region was reached, but also provided a route to Yosemite Point and the brink of Yosemite Fall. Originally a horse trail it had, by 1877, fallen into disrepair and was then being used only by hikers. Few traces of its existence can now be found.

In 1873 John Conway constructed the first unit of the Yosemite Falls trail, suitable for horse travel, to a point near the base of the upper fall where the majesty of that impressive spectacle could be viewed at close range. As this point was the primary objective of most visitors at that time it was not projected beyond that point for a number of years. However, Hutchings' "Tourist Guide" for 1877 states that visitors occasionally scrambled up the draw to the west of Yosemite Fall to reach the north rim, the brink of the falls and Yosemite Point, from which they often returned to the valley floor by way of Indian Canyon.

In 1877 Conway completed the Yosemite Fall trail to the north rim and, in addition, projected it to the summit of Eagle Peak, highest of the Three Brothers. It was a toll route until 1886 when it was purchased from its builder and owner by the Yosemite Valley Commissioners.

(Continued in next month's issue.)

A NEW BIRD RECORD FOR YOSEMITE VALLEY

By Assistant Park Naturalist R. K. Grater

Bird walks in Yosemite Valley are usually somewhat of a routine matter. All along the way one can forecast with some degree of certainty what birds will be encountered, where they will be seen and even what they will be doing. Thus, the bird walk of June 3, 1943, began in the usual manner with the customary woodpeckers seen in the dead cottonwoods at the edge of Sentinel



Meadow and the Sparrow Hawk demonstrating how our commonest falcon behaves. In this meadow is also a low, marshy area where the Kern Red-wings congregate in large numbers to nest, and the party moved slowly along the path to pay a visit to this colony. Suddenly, a short distance ahead, two small

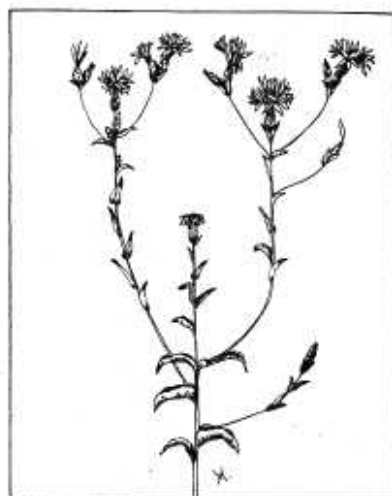
chicken-like birds moved quickly across the patch, followed closely by four tiny black and white youngsters. Here was something definitely not "routine," and there was a very disorganized scramble by members of the party to see what these birds were. Fortunately, the birds had disappeared in grasses that were not so very tall, but which prevented the young birds from moving very fast, and so we were able to still see the grasses shaking and bending as the birds moved into the shallow waters of the marsh. Leaving my group lined up along the edge of the marsh, I circled beyond the birds and waded slowly along, forcing the young ahead toward my waiting group. The old birds were alarmed, but refused to desert their chicks, and, so bit at a time, the entire family was moved back into view, and my party got the first view ever recorded of Virginia Rail and its young in Yosemite National Park. For some time the fuzzy little chicks scurried about, at times almost running over my feet and those of my party, while the worried parents would often come within five feet of members of my group. Finally they were allowed to drift on into the marsh, leaving behind a very much elated party of bird enthusiasts and a Naturalist with a very bedraggled pair of shoes that never fully recovered from the soaking they received.

In going through the records, I find that the Virginia Rail (*Rallus*

virginianus) has been seen in Yosemite on only one previous occasion. On September 30, 1934, Mr. Joseph Dixon observed one of these shy marsh birds near Rocky Point in Yosemite Valley, thus obtaining the first record for the park. Until our party saw this fine little family of six birds, none had been reported in

the park for over eight years.

This nesting record is of unusual importance in that it definitely establishes the Virginia Rail as a summer resident in the park, and suggests that perhaps we may expect this species to become a regular feature of the interesting bird life of Yosemite Valley.



LESSINGIA

Sweet summer lavender—
 A myriad of stars
 In the sun-scorched grass,
 Like a veil enchanting
 On a prairie lass.

Sweet summer lavender
 Adorning the withered
 Like a spring bouquet—
 Flattering passe' grasses,
 Making them young and gay.

—Elizabeth H. Godfrey.



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Dan Anderson