

# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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# Yosemite Nature Notes

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## INNOCENTS AFOOT

By Ruth Elwonger

It was May 27, 1942 and only a few precious days of mountain enjoyment lay ahead for my friend Patsy and me. At their close we must return to city ways and jobs.

Monday, the twenty-fifth, it had rained heavily and on Tuesday threatening clouds had wandered over the valley's rim. It was not auspicious weather for two girls, little more than novices in mountain travel, to contemplate a knapsack trip in the higher country about Merced Lake.

But on Wednesday we packed our knapsacks with equipment for a four days' trip. Each of us carried about 25 pounds, including down sleeping bags and a waterproof "one-man tent" weighing  $3\frac{1}{2}$  pounds. By nine o'clock we were hurrying up the Mist Trail. At its top the sun shone brightly with a warmth which soon dried our dampened clothes and dispelled any fears of the weather we were to encounter.

By the time we had reached the trail leading into Little Yosemite Valley away from Nevada Fall, the exertion of the climb, the excitement

of unknown trails which lay ahead, and the multitude of new and indescribably moving impressions had cleared away from our minds the last doubt or hesitation as to the wisdom of leaving well-trodden valley paths.

We were alone in a world in which we sensed intense activity on all sides. We sat down in the trail and ecstatically marvelled over the beauty of a tiny tree toad bearing on his green back iridescent splotches which we imagined had resulted from too long and intimate association with some yellow mossy crevice. A sharp whir of wings over the manzanita-covered slope on our left attracted our attention. We abandoned our heavy packs and clambered up the slope and discovered a Calliope Hummingbird clinging to the tip of a dead oak. At first he resembled nothing more than an indifferently colored apical bud of a tree not yet in leaf. When we climbed higher and the afternoon sunlight reached us from another angle, he was transformed into a shimmering point of violet and green light. Many minutes passed while

we watched him cling to his perch with head moving untiringly from side to side, then leave it for a distance of a few inches to remain suspended in air with whirring wings, and finally either to plunge vertically downward or to dash out of



sight. The mingled fragrance of tall Jeffrey Pines and sun on the needle-covered trail which snowbanks had just relinquished further raised our spirits. At the intersection of the two routes to Merced Lake we unhesitatingly chose the upper trail. That afternoon we climbed slowly upward through a magnificent forest of Jeffrey Pine and red and white fir.

As the trail passed near the foot of Moraine Dome, Patsy suggested that we prepare an early supper, watch the sunset from the top of a nearby ridge, and then continue on by moonlight. Although neither of us possessed a flashlight, the moon, two days short of full, would be an exciting light to travel by. The setting of the sun without any color other than the varying shades of gray and the rising wind which caused us to hurry into all our extra clothing should have argued against the plan. But the moon arose clear and bright and we went on.

Soon the trail disappeared under an extensive patch of snow but our only reaction was one of delight at

the dark shadows cast by the tall forest trees and our own moving shadows on the white snow. The last trace of daylight left us and the stand of trees became increasingly dense. In the shadows the moonlight was not sufficiently bright to distinguish the trail as it appeared more and more infrequently from under the snow. Soon we were spending most of our time searching for the trail. Huge fallen trees with snow insecurely tucked about them made it necessary to move with caution over the snow. A stream which we crossed on a log roared ferociously an undeterminable distance beneath us. We wanted to follow Sunrise Creek on its south-eastern bank but we were confused by the multiplicity of streams springing from the melting snow. In the dimness each clamored equally for our attention. We knew that soon the trail would divide into the Forsyth, Sunrise and Merced Lake branches, and we were afraid that we would miss the intersection in one of these sorties into the darkness. We peered at our topographic map in the brief flare of a match and only succeeded in burning a hole in it. We had completely lost the trail. It was 10:30. We were standing on a tiny knoll free of snow at the foot of a large pine. As of one mind, we began to prepare camp there for the night. We spread out the tent and fastened its eight spider-like ropes to trees and chaparral. We had no jackknife so we groped about

in the darkness for eight suitable sticks for use as stakes. Fortunately in the damp loam under the tree almost any stick with a crotch at one end held its portion of the tent satisfactorily. Removing our shoes, we crawled inside. The moon shone through the trees more and more faintly, and as we fell to sleep we were uneasily aware of the sound of drops of rain or snow on the roof of the tent.

The next morning I was awakened by Patsy. "It is snowing!" she said with ill-concealed alarm in her voice. "We must find the trail and get out of here before we are snowed in!" I thought sleepily that it was unlikely we would be snowed in so late in the year and refused to do as much as open an eye, but the quickening patter on the roof of the tent removed the last trace of sleep. We hurried into our boots, rolled up the tent and sleeping bags, laid out chocolate and dried fruit to be eaten on the way, and in less than 15 minutes with our packs on our back were searching for the trail.

Unknowingly we had camped only a short distance from the intersection of trails and we were soon descending the north side of the canyon below Merced Lake. In a few minutes we were below the level of winter snow, but newly-fallen hail covered the ground and it was bitterly cold. We identified our first Green-tailed Towhee watching him with binoculars and leaning through Peterson with benumbed fingers. We became

aware of the deep resonant booming of a grouse and soon after observed one in a tree and another flying off on its curiously weighted fashion. A mile and a half below Merced Lake we entered an area where even to our eyes inexperienced in bird observation there seemed to be a concentration of birds in which we were to spend the following two days.

After setting up camp at Merced Lake as securely as possible in a sheltered spot and gathering wood, we walked on to Washburn Lake. The remainder of the day the sun alternately shined warmly and darkened as hail fell. We saw numerous hermit thrushes standing stiffly and silently on logs and boulders looking, it seemed to us, more sad and forelorn than ever. As we neared camp again at 4:30 we found bear tracks in remaining patches of snow. A coyote looked down at us from a rocky ledge and as we watched him ran easily along the ledge to disappear from sight. A Red-breasted Nuthatch no longer

Red-breasted  
Nuthatch



spiralled unceasingly about the trunk and branches of large pines and firs but sat huddled near the

base of a tree in the crotch of a limb and preened his feathers. As we reached camp snow began to fall in a persistent fashion. A poncho rigged up on the windward side protected the fire as we huddled near it and watched food boiling in two billicans. It began to grow dark, but the snow still fell. The ground was now covered except for a small circle near our fire and the firs bore heavy mantles. Although our feet were wet and cold, we trudged over to look at the lake. We saw a slight movement near a fallen tree and picked up a toad and wondered what it was about on such a cold snowy night. The lake was free of snow except for three miniature icebergs floating near the far steep granite edge of the lake. It was curiously placid and in the distance its grayness was difficult to distinguish from that of the sky. Two waterfowl were outlined against the far shore. As we crawled into our tent that night, the moon rose farther in the sky and we heard the chorusing of coyotes which continued as we fell to sleep.

The next morning water was frozen in our billicans, and the snow crackled underfoot as we walked to the edge of the river for water. Our path crossed a fascinating assortment of footprints and we wished we were able to tell from them what animals had been about. Coyotes still called to one another.

The rising sun soon wiped out all traces of the new-fallen snow. Only tiny hardly-noticed reminders were

left—a single drop of water at the apex of the petiole of each lupine leaf, nicely adjusted in size to the size of the leaf it ornamented. Tiny waterfalls tumbling down mossy slopes through borders of icicles reminded us of the coldness of the night just passed.

We started on a day's hike to Babcock Lake. By 2:00 in the afternoon we had reached a high point on the trail from which we looked down into a basin filled with snow. The sun had again darkened and clouds settled with an air of finality on the snow-covered Clark Range, and we turned back toward camp. Two Townsend Solitaires in a juniper tree on the rocky slope flew out from their perches to snatch at dried juniper berries. Through snow which had begun to fall we noticed in a Lodgepole Pine a large loosely put together nest near the trunk of the tree, and a Clarke Nutcracker peered over its edge and squalled vainly for help from her mate. He answered from a distant tree but we did not catch sight of him.

That night it became warmer and the snow changed to rain. The next morning in beautifully warm sunshine we reluctantly took leave of our camp and started for home. We had progressed only a few hundred yards when we caught sight of a pair of Violet-green Swallows perched near a dead Jeffrey Pine. As we admired the violet and green iridescence of the male, one or the other bird would visit a hole in the dead pine, clinging to the entrance

way, the female on one occasion entering it. Our interest increased as chips showered down to the foot of the tree and we heard from within the sound of a woodpecker working.



Tapping the trunk a Red-shafted Flicker flew out of the hole which the swallows had been examining.

Following the lower trail we soon reached Little Yosemite Valley where there was no suggestion of the cold and winter of the upper

Merced Canyon. Flowers reappeared underfoot, and the needles and trees exhaled their fragrant warmth. We passed the slope on which four days before we had watched the Calliope Hummingbird. Our hearts beat more quickly as we made out with difficulty on the same dead oak tree the dark, bud-like object. Climbing up the slope we again watched his dives, hovering, and mad dashes. Two hikers passed and the realization came over us that our trip was at an end. The multitude of impressions of birds too preoccupied to show concern at our presence, the aloneness in a newborn fresh world, and intimate contact with rain and snow, we shall never forget.

### MAJESTIC PREFERENCE

By Elizabeth H. Godfrey, NPS Staff

Majestic are the cliffs of fair Yosemite

Its falls are full of grandeur and of grace—  
Can we decide if Half Dome should be King  
Or should El Capitan take foremost place?

El Capitan in moonlight is supreme;

Yet think of Half Dome garbed in purest snow,  
When in the spell of ebbing winter's day  
Is touched by rosy tints of Alpenglow.

The stars appear as jewels for its crown—

In winter may we not proclaim it king?  
But when azaleas bloom in meadow nearness  
El Capitan takes regal rights for spring.

For fall and summer, I shall not contend

El Capitan—majestic Half Dome far apart,  
Which is the valley monarch? Let each one decide  
According to the dictates of his heart.



# MUSEUM NOTES

## RUSSELL K. GRATER JOINS MUSEUM STAFF

By M. E. Beatty, Associate Park Naturalist

On April 15, Russell K. Grater entered on duty for the "duration" in Yosemite National Park as Assistant Park Naturalist, filling the position vacated last November by Harry C. Parker upon his induction into the Army. Mr. Grater was transferred from Zion National Park in Utah where he served as Park Naturalist (Assistant grade) since September, 1940. There he was responsible for the naturalist program at Zion and Bryce Canyon National Parks and also Cedar Breaks and Pipe Springs National Monuments.

Mr. Grater is already quite familiar with Yosemite, having been a member of 1931 class of the Yosemite School of Field Natural History and having worked as a seasonal ranger here during the summer of 1933.

He has had wide experience in other national parks, having served as ranger-naturalist in Glacier National Park during the summer of 1932 and also in Grand Canyon National Park during 1934 and 1935. From 1936 to 1938, he was District Wildlife Technician with headquarters in Denver, Colorado, and in April, 1938, received a permanent

appointment as Junior Park Naturalist at Boulder Dam National Recreation Area.

During the winter of 1939-1940 he was awarded the NPS Fellowship at Yale University, where he undertook special research work relating to the naturalist program. In September following his return from Yale, Mr. Grater received his appointment as Park Naturalist at Zion National Park.

We are happy to welcome Mr. and Mrs. Grater and their two children to Yosemite. With the filling of this position it will be possible to better serve the increasing number of organized military groups who are coming to Yosemite for both maneuvers and inspiration.



## SUMMER NATURALIST PROGRAM CURTAILED

Due to curtailment of funds resulting from the war program, no Ranger-Naturalists will be employed this summer. This will mean the

elimination of a large part of the naturalist program which has been so popular with Yosemite visitors in the past. No naturalist service will be available at Glacier Point, Tuolumne Meadows nor at the Mariposa Grove, but the main museum in Yosemite Valley will remain open as usual.

In addition to the operation of the museum, including informal talks on the formation of the Valley several

times daily in the geology room, the members of the permanent naturalist staff will endeavor to carry out a limited program of hikes and evening illustrated lectures. Special service will be given to organized groups, particularly military units, whenever possible.

Complete details concerning the current schedule of naturalist activities may be obtained at the Park Museum.

M. E. B.



### CALIFORNIA COONS IN YOSEMITE

By R. N. McIntyre, Park Ranger

Compilation of notes found in Ranger Reports during the winter of 1943 reveals evidence that the California Coon (*Procyon lotor psora*) has extended its range into Yosemite National Park.

Studies by Grinnell and Storer recorded in "Animal Life in the Yosemite," University of California Press, Berkeley, California, indicate that the California Coon is commonly found in the lower and upper Sonoran zones and less commonly in the lower transition zones at 3,000 to 4,000 feet elevation. These gentlemen record the presence of coons

near El Portal and one instance of tracks being found along a creek near Hazel Green at an elevation of 5,665 feet.

Brief conversations with a few of the older park residents prompt the author to believe that coons have been observed at different times within or near the present south and west boundary of Yosemite for years, but these observations have gone unrecorded. I hope that the publication of our meager supply of notes on the presence of coons within the boundaries of Yosemite National Park will stimulate interest among



those students of nature who can help us complete the picture by recording future observations.

On February 5th, 1942, at 9:30 p.m., I observed a coon feeding in the garbage can by South Entrance Station. On March 7th, 1942, I observed two coons fighting over an orange at South Entrance Station. I parted them with a flashlight.

In late August of 1942 Ranger L. C. Danner observed a coon by the horse barn at Tuolumne Meadows. He saw many tracks around Tenaya Lake, where they were feeding on fish or frogs at low water in September.

On October 22nd, 1942, I reported from Crane Flat that one litter of two young had been seen near Merced Grove by fishermen and reported to me. I also saw a coon in the headlights of the Government pickup in Merced Grove during the 1942 deer season.

On October 27th, 1942, Temporary Ranger J. Culbreath reported having seen one coon that season working along the South Fork of the Tuolumne River near Big Oak Flat Entrance. On January 25th, 1943, Ranger Homer Robinson reported that coons were again in evidence around the South Entrance Station.

During February and March of 1942, both Ranger Robinson and I reported that the nocturnal visits of coons to the South Entrance Station

and the duplex quarters were quite common. At least three animals were observed at one time. Tracks and bits of fur after a fight over a choice morsel of food indicated that at least four animals had participated. I fed one large coon at least twice.

Once, on passing the garbage can by the quarters at night and seeing a tail protruding from the open can, I gently lifted the animal out, parking him on the snow. After replacing the lid, I went into the quarters and returned with bread. The coon was still in sight, but refused to sample the bread.

While ski touring near South Entrance in March of 1942, Ranger Robinson and I observed a "coon tree" within one-half mile of Big Creek in the logged-off section of the park. The tree, an incense cedar partly burned and hollow, showed the unmistakable runway of coons up its stringy bark. The entrance to the den could not be seen from below. Fresh tracks leading over the snow, to and from the base of the tree, indicated that the cedar was being used as a den by one or two coons.

The author believes that future observations will reveal other "coon trees" within the park as well as data to complete the elevation range between South Entrance at 5,000 feet and Tuolumne Meadows at 9,000 feet.





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Dan Anderson