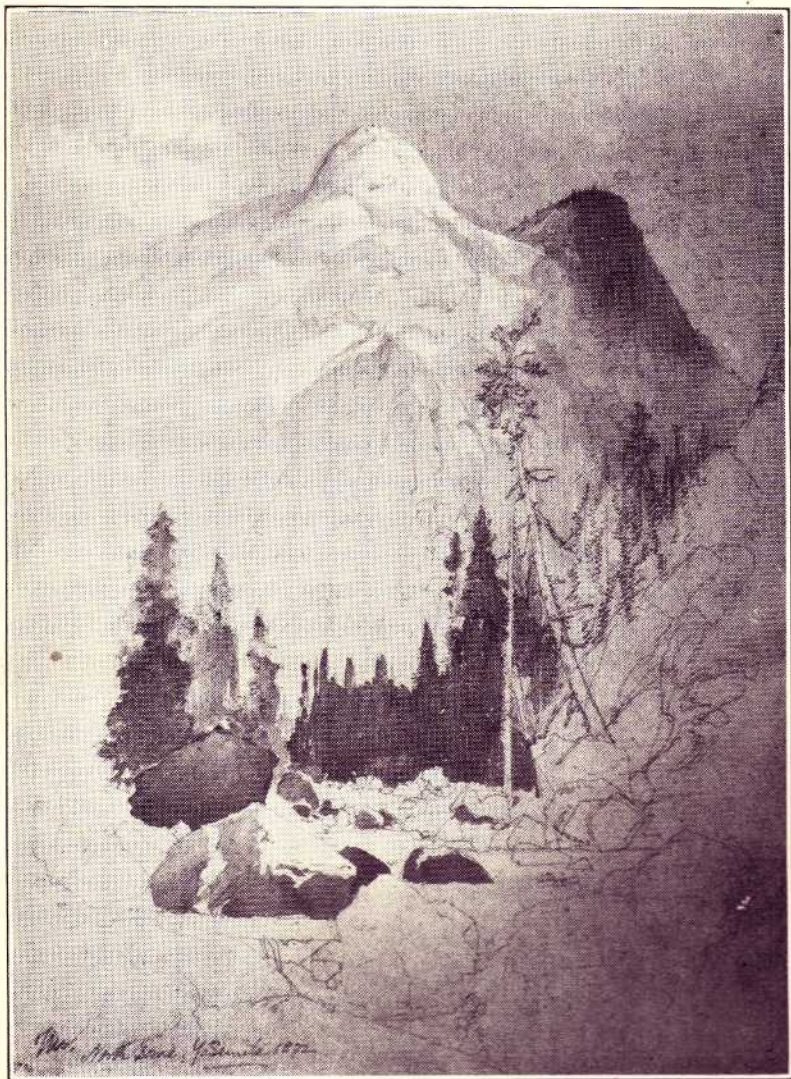


# YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES



Sketch of  
North Dome  
by  
Thomas Moran.

# Yosemite Nature Notes

THE MONTHLY PUBLICATION OF  
THE YOSEMITE NATURALIST DIVISION AND  
THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION, INC.

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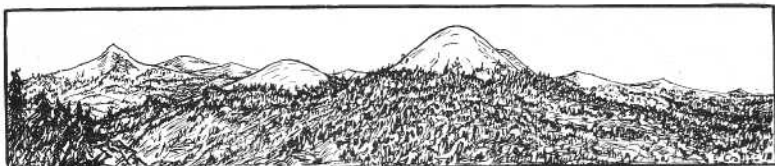
NOVEMBER, 1948

NO. 11

## TRANSITORY HOUR IN YOSEMITE

By May Dean Ends

The purple shadows of evening  
Creep slowly up the canyon walls.  
Half Dome, crowned with the sun's  
Last golden light,  
Stands watch—serene, proud.  
Nostalgic fragrance of wood smoke,  
Heady spice of incense-cedar  
Perfume the air.  
Flowers, feeling the touch  
Of the Great Spirit,  
Slowly close their silken petals while  
The sequined blackness  
Of the star filled night  
Falls o'er the Valley as a benediction—  
And man, held in the enchantment  
Of this transitory hour,  
May catch a glimpse of all Infinity  
And know its peace.



## "MOTHER" CURRY, PIONEER, PASSES ON

By Hilmer Oehlmann

The death of Mrs. D. A. Curry October 10, 1948, at her modest cottage in the camp that bears her name marks the loss to Yosemite of its most widely known and most deeply loved resident.

Reverend Alfred Glass conducted a memorial service for Mrs. Curry in the Yosemite Church Bowl October 12. In that service Mr. Glass dwelt briefly upon the long record of Mrs. Curry's active and useful life, which has been abundantly publicized in this fiftieth anniversary of Camp Curry's founding. Rather did he emphasize the virtues which made that rich life an expression of the strength, purity, calmness and vision which our concept of the finest in pioneer American womanhood.

To all who knew her even by reputation she was "Mother" Curry. No designation could better epitomize the affection, wisdom and inspiration which flowed from her contact with the many thousands who served her as employees or visited her as guests.



"Mother" Curry has gone from Yosemite as a beloved presence there. Her spirit will never cease to grace the Valley she loved so dearly. As it was a part of her, so she will ever be a part of its imperishable beauty. The sorrow we feel at "Mother" Curry's passing gives place to an abiding gladness that a human life could be so completely beautiful, so fully responsive to our ideals, so richly graven on our memories.

### SOME YOSEMITE POSTAL HISTORY FIRST'S

**The first letter** known to have been written in Yosemite Valley was dispatched from there on the 15th of May, 1851. The letter was in the nature of a report from Captain Boling to Major Savage regarding the activities of the company of the Mariposa Battalion which had been sent back to the Yosemite Valley to surprise and drub the troublesome Indian residents.

The report appeared in its entirety in the June 12th issue of "Alta California." The letter was headed "Merced River, Yosemite Village,

May 15, 1851." Anywhere from two to five days may have elapsed from the time it was dispatched from Yosemite Village to the time Major Savage received it. As an Indian war was in progress at the time the messenger or messengers would naturally be very cautious, may have picked their way slowly, and may have travelled a longer but safer route back to the Major.

As Mariposa was the starting point for the Mariposa Battalion had become the seat of county government in 1851, and had also been

established as a post office in the same year it can be surmised that either the original letter or a copy was mailed to the "Alta California" from Mariposa. At the present time the writer does not know whether or not the original letter still exists.

This letter is a very interesting account of the times and Carl P. Russell in his "One Hundred Years in Yosemite" has included it in its entirety in the appendix. It is recommended reading for those interested in Yosemite history.—Emil F. Ernst, Park Forester.

## THE MIRROR LAKE DELTA

By Harry B. Robinson, Former Assistant Park Naturalist

For the past twenty years or more old timers visiting the park have remarked about Mirror Lake becoming smaller. Some of these individuals have actually been alarmed over the possibility of Yosemite losing one of its famed attractions.

Geologically speaking the life cycle of a lake is brief. The formative period of many lakes is as long or longer than the destructive period. However, evidence supports the belief that Mirror Lake's origin was cataclysmic—that it was formed by a rock slide which dammed the waters of Tenaya Creek. Hence, most of Mirror Lake's life cycle has been a period of destruction. It is the writer's opinion that much more of the lake had been destroyed before it was first observed by a white man than since that time, although old photographs indicate considerable advancement of the delta during the past seventy-five years.



Figure 1

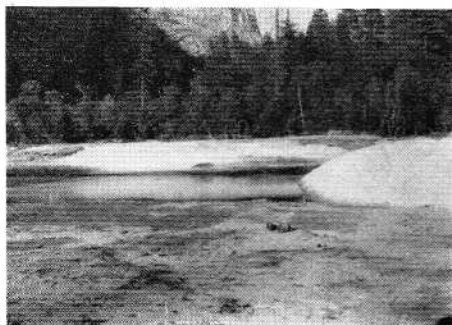


Figure 2

Doubtless the lake eventually will disappear completely.

Old timers need not worry about the inevitable destruction of Mirror Lake. Rather they should revel in the fact that they have been able to witness a geologic process in action. For here one has the opportunity of studying the growth of a delta and its consequent destruction of a body of water. Here also one has the rare opportunity of studying the succession of plant growth upon the surface of a delta.

The writer visited Mirror Lake on October 1, 1947, with the idea of attempting to establish a minimum age for the delta by a tree-ring study of trees growing thereon. His thoughts immediately were diverted toward the possibility of an entirely different study in respect to the delta.

The lake proper was completely dry, only two small depressions near the delta front being occupied

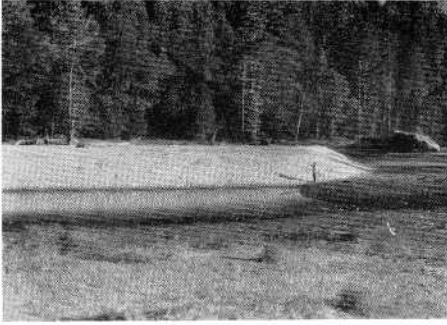


Figure 3

by water (Figures 1, 2 and 3). The bed of Tenaya Creek was free of running water for approximately 350 yards above the lake, and the foremost front of the delta, normally hidden by the waters of this stream, was completely exposed. Bubbles rising from the small pool nearest the dry channel of the creek (Figures 2 and 3) indicated that the pool was being replenished by sub-channel seepage or that marsh gas was rising from beneath it. The height of the foremost extension of the delta was approximately seven feet as indicated by the 5-foot 7-inches height of the writer, who stood at its foot while the delta front was photographed (Figure 3).

The delta front shown in Figure 4 is in line of sight with three cedar trees and two huge boulders on the east side and a large Douglas fir on the west. Further extension of the delta front at this point may be determined by sighting between these landmarks.

It is not known how long the main channel of the creek has followed its present course on the west side of the delta, nor how long it may continue on that side. Perhaps some of the old timers may remember when the main channel was on the other side. It is not unusual for the

course of a delta stream to change in flood times. Even today, approximately 100 yards above the dry lake bed, a secondary channel debouches from the main stream course and cuts across the delta. Earlier in the year, when the main channel of the stream is swollen by water from the melting snow, some of the water is carried to the lake through this secondary channel.

Investigation indicated that the proposed tree-ring study to determine the age of the delta would have been futile. A cut made into the delta by the main stream revealed willow stumps buried to a depth of four to six feet, indicating two or more generations of trees.

Most of the trees on the delta are willows, but some very young incense-cedars and ponderosa pines are developing as well as cottonwoods. The willows grow rapidly, keeping pace with the forward growth of the delta as demonstrated by Figure 1, which shows shrubs at the very edge of the lake basin.

Plot studies of vegetative growth on the delta will be continued and periodic observations relative to the advancement of the delta will be made. Perhaps after further study the age of Mirror Lake and the date of its complete extinction may be fairly well established.



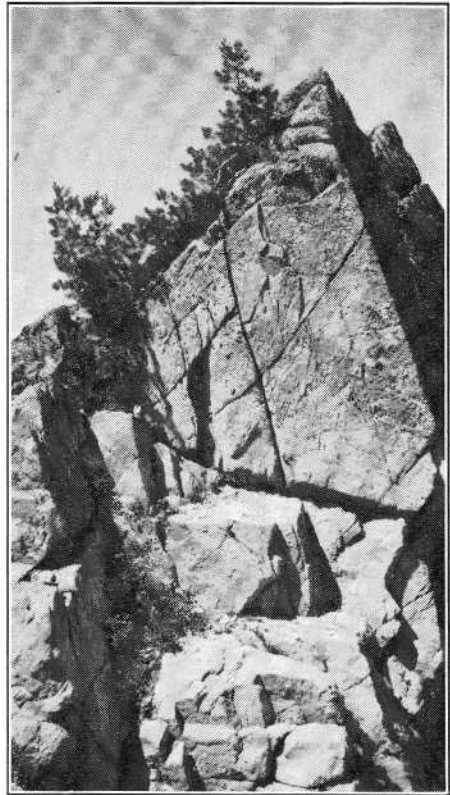
Figure 4

## IS A WHITEBARK PINE ONE TREE OR MANY?

By Richard G. Lillard, Field School, 1948

In the summer of 1948 I found evidence that branches of *Pinus albicaulis* will layer under favorable conditions. I had never before observed this phenomenon in any pine. Later I found no mention of this striking trait in any of the standard references on California pines, such as the basic volumes by Jepson, Abrams, and Sudworth. Mc-Minn, in "Illustrated Manual of California Shrubs" points out that *P. albicaulis* is the only one of the thirty members of the pine family in California that assumes the growth pattern of shrubs, but he does not mention that it layers. Even the authoritative article, "Whitebark Pine—Timberline Tree" by Carl and Helen Sharsmith, takes no note of layering, though it raises the relevant problem: "Sometimes many separate, short, erect trunks are formed, and it is difficult to be sure one is dealing with an individual tree. To judge from the ground surface, the trunks do not seem to be joined, but below it they may spring from the same root system."<sup>2</sup>

On August 28 I studied a whitebark pine specimen near the southwest corner of Babcock Lake, at an elevation just below 9,000 feet. It grows on a well-drained bank of Cathedral Peak granite gravel and looks like many whitebark pines. It has 12 leaders ranging from a quarter of an inch Diameter Breast Height to 7 inches DBH. Several leaders are broken off, one at 4 feet, one at 2 feet, and two at 10 feet. The leaders intertwine at the base of the clump. The tallest is about 28 feet high. Near by are other



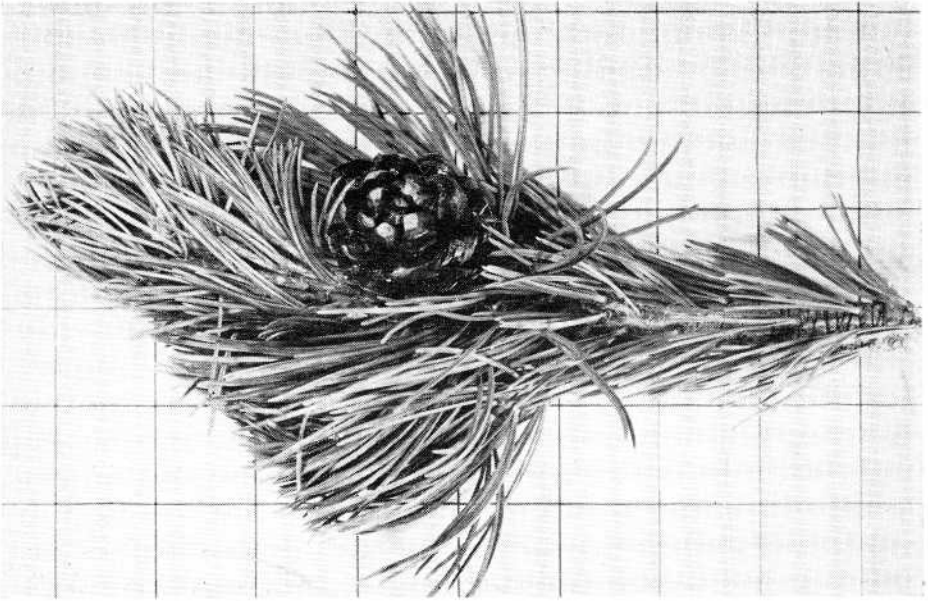
*Whitebark pine in rocky habitat*

whitebark clusters, similar in size and appearance, and many lodgepole pines (*P. murrayana*) between 60 and 70 feet high.

I pried in the caked duff at the foot of the specimen tree and found four bona fide branches that had layered. No. 1 is prostrate and looks dead but has three living roots. No. 2 is a prostrate branch 2 inches in diameter and about 3 feet long. It supports many branchlets that may become leaders in the course of time. No. 3 is an inch in diameter. It

1. *American Forests*, Vol. 53, pp. 350 ff. (Aug., 1947).

2. *Ibid.*, p. 378.



*Cone and foliage of whitebark pine. (Inch squares on background)*

has layered 6 feet from the center of the clump, and at the outer end it has arched erect to become a low, potential leader. No. 4, three-eighths of an inch in diameter, has layered 2 feet from the center. It continues prostrate for 4 feet more and then curls sunward.

I checked my discovery against a near-by whitebark cluster that had 22 leaders taller than BH. The evidence tallied. One leader was 4 inches in diameter at the ground. Above the duff a one-inch branch took off from it, disappeared under the duff for 4 feet, and reappeared to send up four prospective leaders. I found roots growing from the bottom

of this branch at points 2 inches below the surface of the duff.

On the west side of the lake I saw a prostrate lodgepole pine, one long ago knocked down by a falling snag. It was sturdy and green. I examined branches that had lived for years under duff and in forced contact with damp soil. I found no evidence of layering in this specimen of *P. murrayana*.

Only excavation of a clump of whitebark pine "trees" will settle the question. But the Babcock Lake specimens raise the possibility that a single tree, by the primitive method of layering, may produce one of the impressive groups of slim trunks that provide scenic excitement in the high elevations of Yosemite.



**FAWNS ESCAPE EAGLE'S ATTACK****By Richard H. Boyer, Ranger****Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks, California**

1. **American Forests**, vol. 53, pp. 350 ff. (Aug., 1947).

2. **Ibid.**, p. 378.

Editor's Note: This contribution is used by permission of Superintendent Scoyen, Sequoia-Kings Canyon National Parks, California. Regional Biologist Sumner has made this statement with reference to Ranger Boyer's story:

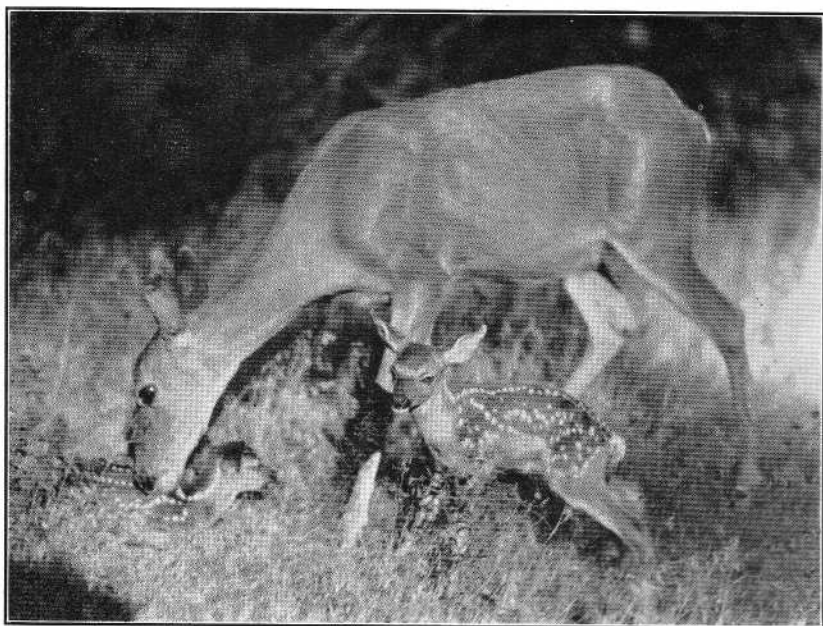
"Not long ago this office submitted . . . an eye-witness account of an attack on a fawn by a golden eagle." Apparently the fawn was killed by the eagle because the mother was not present to protect it. Mr. Boyer's very similar observation offers a comparison of significant scientific value in that the mother's presence for the defense of her young seems to be a deciding factor in survival from such attacks."

While on a routine horse patrol to the vicinity of Alta Meadows in Sequoia National Park, Ranger Jim Bates and the writer were given the opportunity to observe, from a distance, the attacks of a golden eagle upon a doe with two fawns.

At 1:00 p.m. on July 23, 1948, we had stopped at the Alta Peak-Moose Lake trail junction. From a distance we both heard an agonized bawling or screaming sound, and naturally turned east toward Tharp's Rock to see what had caused the cry. A large bird was seen making circles

over a 300-yard area at the base of the rock. It was thought to be a condor at the first examination, but a study of its flight and habits soon decided that it was a golden eagle.

While we observed the bird it made a diving pass at an area on the almost bare, slick rock slope and we were startled to see the two fawns running wildly about on the rock, with the doe attempting to keep them together. She finally herded them into the cover of two western white pines, about twelve feet high and growing in close proximity to



*Photo by Harwell*

\*See also "Golden Eagle Attacks Young Deer," **Yosemite Nature Notes**, Vol. XXVII No. 9, September, 1948.



each other, the only cover within one hundred yards.

The eagle would make a pass, within five or six feet of the mammals, in an attempt to cut one out from the protection of the doe, and swerve up into the air at the last possible moment. The doe would make quick bounding jumps at the bird, stand on her hind legs and strike at it, causing it to flap heavily away. The fawns, being greatly frightened, would leave cover, run on the slick granite, slipping and sliding, and colliding with each other, and were finally separated. The eagle, after making a near strike, would wheel away, rising several hundred feet into the air and several hundred yards to the north, then dive down within ten feet of the convex rock slope, and using the rounded slope as a cover, would approach rapidly. When over the fawn the farthest from the doe, it would drop suddenly with one

talon extended and strike the fawn, which was in a rock crevice. This caused a repetition of the bawling we heard. The doe then frantically bounded to the rescue, but by this time the bird would have arisen out of danger, and would be ready for another pass.

The entire episode had taken but ten minutes from the time we had first seen the action. We moved out from a fringe of trees in order to shorten the distance (about 600 yards) to the scene. As we did this the eagle rose higher in the air, headed east and away from us, skirting the south side of Tharp's Rock and disappeared from view. Several minutes later, the doe and the fawns, one of the latter moving jerkily and more slowly than the other, made their way down the slope to timber cover and also disappeared. We had evidently interrupted (from our, the human, viewpoint) one of nature's everyday tragedies.

### BOOK REVIEW

ALONG YOSEMITE TRAILS, by Josef Muench. Hastings House, New York, 1948. 101 pp. Paper, \$1.75; cloth, \$2.75. Collection of pictures in gravure, with map.

Here is a work by one of the premier photographers of the Western scene. Except for three pages of the introduction by Joyce Rockwood Muench, every page contains one or more pictures portraying the countless facets of Yosemite National Park, its many moods, its changing seasons, and its magnificent back country.

In the introduction, Mrs. Muench has, in a very definitive way, expressed the significance of Yosemite as a National Park and the spiritual rejuvenation experienced by those who travel the trails there.

Concerning the latter she writes:

"Returning travelers bring back a warm color in the cheek and a far-away look in the eye. Food, they recall, never tasted better than when eaten in the mountains; water was never as refreshing as that taken from the wild stream. But best of all was the feel of the earth beneath the feet and the all-embracing air of freedom that filled the lungs. Pleasantly they remember the fatigue that came as a reward for the day spent on the trail. Who can convey to one who has never experienced it, the sense of release that puts wings on feet turned toward a distant camping spot or a high pass to be conquered?" (H.C.P.)

(Editor's Note: This book may be ordered through the Yosemite Natural History Association at \$1.90 for the paper bound copy or \$2.95 for the cloth. These prices include tax, postage and mailing.)



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Dan Anderson