YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES

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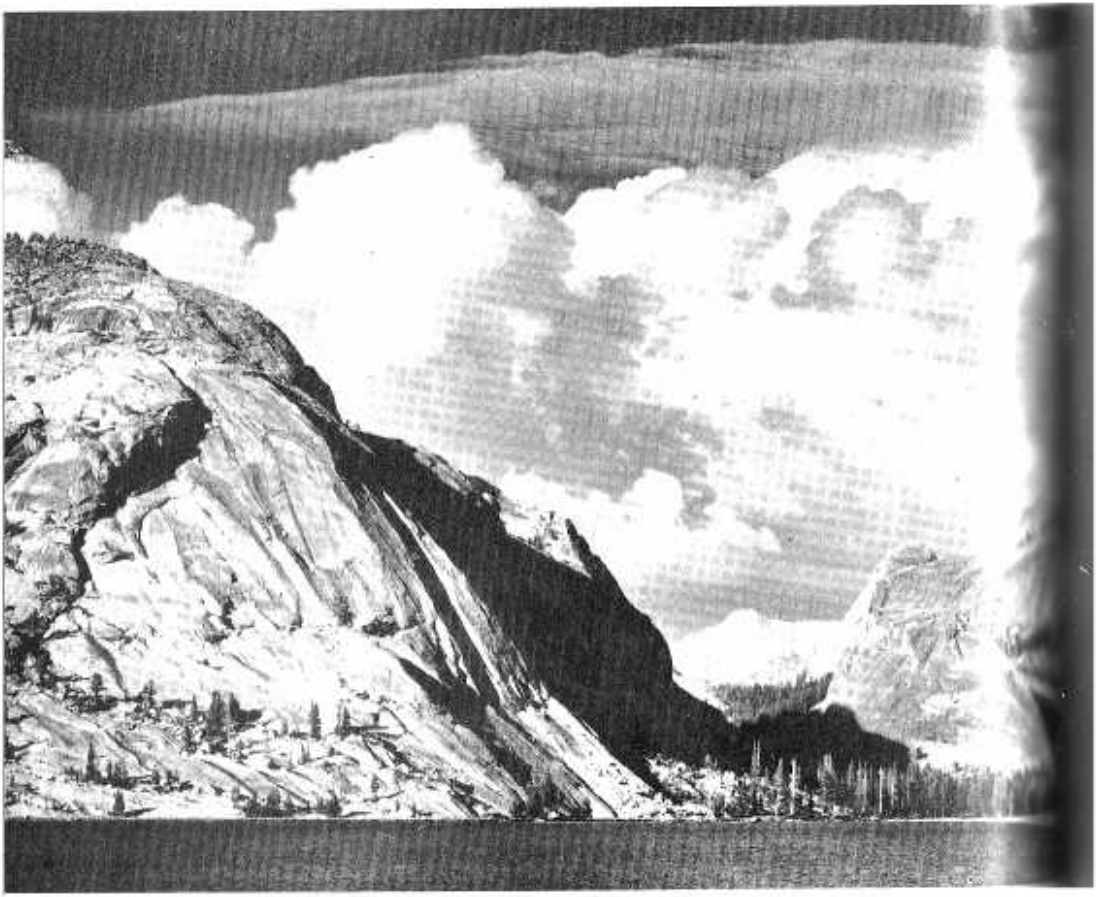
WASHINGTON COLUMN AND HALF DOME, YOSEMITE VALLEY
—Ansel Adams



Tenaya Lake, Yosemite National Park. By Ansel Adams from "Yosemite and the Sierra Nevada" by permission of Houghton Mifflin Company.

Yosemite Nature Notes

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SUMMER THUNDERSTORM AT TEN LAKES

By Richard Lehman, Ranger-Naturalist

The sky was overcast the morning of July 26 in Yosemite Valley, but by 11 a.m. at White Wolf the clouds were not threatening so I was off with backpack for Ten Lakes. The forest trail was soggy from more than a week of afternoon showers. Numerous fallen red fir and lodgepole pine attested to a severe previous winter.

At 2 p.m. as I paused at the headwaters of Yosemite Creek to enjoy a vista down the drainage basin feeding the Yosemite Falls, a light rain began. At the Merced-Tuolumne divide, the north country burst into view shrouded with drifting mists and low clouds. From the east came the rumble of distant thunder as dark clouds drifted overhead. At Heart Lake (Ten Lake No. 2) the rain turned to an intense continuous shower as the roar of thunder increased. I sought out first the shelter of a giant hemlock and then, as the downpour turned to mixed rain and hail, I located a dry spot under a huge granite block. For two hours I counted out seconds between light ning flash and thunder as the nearby forest floor became covered with sheets of draining water.

At 5 p.m. the flooding storm eased to light rain and, hoping that the worst was past, I sloshed across swollen rivulets and up a drenched trail to Mileaway (Ten Lake No. 6), the highest of the Ten Lakes. While trudging along the flooded outlet, the leaden sky lit up brilliantly and the silence exploded as a thunderbolt slashed a living hemlock across the lake. After a few ominous moments the rain turned to intense shower and hail, accompanied by near simultaneous flash and thunder. For 2½ hours the most severe thunderstorm that I have ever experienced flooded the saturated forest floor. I huddled under a dripping hemlock, afraid to touch the trunk which could have at any moment served as a living lightening rod.

At sunset the downpour eased to a drizzle and at dusk the skies to the west cleared. By 9:30 p.m. the stars appeared overhead, reassuring a soaked hiker that it seldom rains at night in the high Sierra.

NUTHATCH FLEDGELINGS CLIMB OUT

By Woodrow Smith, Ranger-Naturalist

Evoking smiles and laughter from visitors is the remark made by the ranger-naturalists that the old snag left standing before them is a valuable apartment house. Too often the casual visitor misses the pleasure of witnessing the truth to this statement. Sapsuckers, woodpeckers, and nuthatches are not timid or unobtrusive to the point that it is difficult to observe their nesting activities; we don't look carefully enough as we pass by. The camper who takes time to sit awhile with open eyes has an opportunity to get better acquainted with his wildlife neighbors.

For three seasons a favorite home for the slender-billed nuthatches in the Glacier Point campground has been the top of a "cat's eye" in a Jeffrey pine. The nest hole is just over six feet from ground level. In the summer of 1955 Bill Hood, whose color slides are frequently shown at naturalist programs, spent several hours photographing the feeding chores of the parent nuthatches. Again this year during the first two weeks of July, campers near the site were entertained by the bold little mother and father busily shuttling insect food picked from the bark crevices of nearby pines and firs for their young.

The "airlift" schedule of two-minute intervals was stopped by the parent birds on July 16. Noting the cessation of activity and growing impatient after 20 minutes of waiting, I decided that another cycle had

outgrown its quarters. I was wron
On July 17, while passing the nu
hatch apartment, I noticed the nes
hole "plugged" by the head of
young nuthatch. His black cap an
white throat were none too slee
he appeared to be untidy and ove
stuffed, filling the nesthole apertu
so fully that he seemed stuck in th
perfect circle doorway that hi
mother and father had so deftly e
tered and left for hundreds of feedi
missions.

The fledgling and I stared at ea
other for a minute, then I stepped u
for a closer look. Like a pop of a co
out of a bottle, the little nuthat
catapulted out, swooped rath
clumsily, and landed on the tru
of a nearby fir. Immediately he b
gan the characteristic skittering u
the rough bark, zigzagging in h
ascent to safety. My attention w
then diverted to the doorway whe
a second young bird appeared. A
he twisted his neck and peered u

then launched out to scramble up in follow-the-leader fashion, losing traction now and then as pieces of bark would break away. A fall of a foot or two down the trunk of the tree was followed by more energetic efforts to gain toeholds, and up the tree he went to parallel the first fledgling. Seconds later a third young bird appeared and without hesitation repeated the exodus act.

Now, with three young nuthatches peeping and zigzagging their way upstairs, I was treated to the sight of a solicitous parent swooping in to take charge of the situation. But the birds were no longer in the easily-disciplined confines of the nesthole; on their own, they were already pausing, peering, and pecking at interesting bits in the crevices of the bark. Nervously flying from the home tree to where the first fledgling was climbing into the top of the fir, the parent surveyed the situation, then suddenly flew to the nesthole, disappearing briefly. Peeping soft calling notes, the parent reappeared, climbed above the hole a few inches, and waited. Immediately a fourth young bird appeared at the entrance. After some hesitation he clumsily began his sally into the outside world. Faltering as he lost his hold on the bark, he fell to the base of the tree. In a second he was desperately hitching his way up the trunk, climbing higher and higher in an effort to catch up. As all four youngsters and the parent bird disappeared into the heights above, I thought how much easier it was for them than for some fledglings who must depend solely upon their wings during the first flight, the fledglings that fall out of nests prematurely and are unable to gain security from predators on the ground by the simple expedient of clambering up the bark of a tree. No wonder our nuthatches are so confident and unafraid. As their "yank-yank" calls echo through our forest, I can imagine the young apprentices quickly learning the art of tree-trunk cleaning. Valuable foresters, these nuthatches!

COYOTES AT CRANE FLAT

By George Heinsohn, Museum Assistant

On July 3 after just starting a short afternoon walk, I had the privilege of observing two full grown coyotes for a period of about two hours. I had come up to Crane Flat on this clear, sunny afternoon to escape the oppressing heat and crowds of Yosemite Valley and to admire the wildflowers, meadows, and luxuriant Sierran coniferous forest of this region above 6,000 feet elevation.

At about 3 p.m. approximately 200 yards from the Crane Flat entrance station at the edge of the large meadow lying between the Big Oak Flat and Tioga Pass Roads, I stopped short upon seeing a gray animal resembling a sheep dog, with narrow face, long bushy tail, and thin spindly legs poised motionless out in the meadow. Upon letting my gaze wander around the meadow I

spotted a second coyote moving slowly through the grass searching for food. For two hours these two animals wandered over the lush, green grassy reaches of the meadow in a seemingly aimless fashion searching for food. Only once did I see a coyote catch an animal, this being at about 3:15, shortly after I arrived. The coyote had made a successful pounce and came up with a small brown animal in its mouth. At the distance of about 50 yards I was unable to identify the prey. Only at one other time, at about 4:15, was a coyote seen to pounce. Apparently it was waiting for an animal at the entrance of a burrow as it stood poised for several minutes, with its head cocked at an angle. All of a sudden it gave a quick pounce, coming down with its two front feet and mouth. This time the lightning-quick movement either was not fast enough or it was not timed just right, as the coyote came up empty-mouthed.

The method of hunting was one of wandering very slowly over the meadow with frequent stops for purpose of looking, listening, and smell-

seen poised ready to pounce, [illegible] only did so twice as already mentioned. It is possible that one or both coyotes may have caught food at other than the one observed in stance. Generally I could only keep one under surveillance at a time from my vantage point among the trees, and occasionally I would lose sight of both of them when they went below a slight rise or behind a willow thicket. The two at all times hunted independently.

The following day I made a special trip up to Crane Flat to make an examination of the meadow. Lots of gopher workings were seen in my meanderings over the meadow. Some of these were fresh, but the majority were old, many being earth cores remaining from the previous winter when the gophers burrowed on the surface of the gound under the snow. The areas most frequented by the coyotes were those in which there were an abundance of gopher workings. No mice runways were seen in the area, but this might have been because the rapid growth of the vegetation in the meadow at this time of year was more than able to

The close proximity of the Tioga and Big Oak Flat Roads with frequently passing cars did not disturb the animals, and no one in passing cars seemed to notice the coyotes. The only times the animals seemed aware of the cars were when there were occasional blarings of automobile horns. At such a signal, the coyotes stood still with head up, listening.

One coyote left the meadow at about 4:45, going into the forest up a steep slope near a small clump of aspens at the east end of the meadow. The second departed at 5:00 in about the same region and in the same direction as the first. Their departures were very leisurely, being at a slow walk. About a minute after the second left, a loud series of calls and yelps lasting several seconds were heard from a low hill above the meadow. One faint answer by a coyote was heard to the west of Crane Flat, and another answer came from the horn of a car on the highway. At about 5:05 for about 15 or 20 seconds the forest to the east resounded with a series of howls and yelps coming from 3 or 4 places farther away. Thus ended a rewarding afternoon of watching these beneficial rodent controllers.

PERSONNEL CHANGES

You alert readers who have been watching the masthead of *Yosemite Nature Notes* have noted several changes in recent months in the staff of the Yosemite Naturalist Division.

Donald McHenry has retired after many years with the National Park Service. He and Mrs. McHenry are making their home at 19191-A Beckwith Road, Los Gatos, California.

Associate Park Naturalist Douglass Hubbard advanced to the position of Park Naturalist and Glenn Gallison from Park Biologist to Associate Park Naturalist. With the departure of Wayne Bryant for the Black Hills of South Dakota, Bill Bullard became Assistant Park Naturalist. Last, but not least, Robert W. Carpenter has come from Everglades National Park in Florida to the position of Junior Park Naturalist.

A SWEET-TOOTHED CHIPMUNK

By Jack Fry, Ranger-Naturalist

While on contact duty at Happy Isles last summer, a white object moving up the trunk of a nearby Douglas fir caught my eye. Closer examination revealed the object to be a stick from an ice cream bar being carried by a chipmunk. I stood quietly and watched it, and the animal returned to the base of the tree. It held the stick in its fore paws and passed it back and forth past its mouth much the same way in which one eats corn on the cob.

The motions were quite rapid and I was too far away to see just what the animal was doing. However, it appeared to be licking the stick.

After a few minutes a second chipmunk appeared on the scene and proceeded to chase the finder of the stick about 10 feet. It then returned, found the stick which was dropped in the hasty retreat of the first animal, and began licking in the same manner as did the first. This activity continued for several minutes until the animal was frightened off by some approaching hikers.

I picked up the stick and observed that there were no tooth marks to be seen, thus confirming my suspicion that the animals were licking rather than chewing the chocolate which remained on the stick when it was discarded.

If the sticks from ice cream bars *must* be thrown on the ground, the chipmunks would probably be very appreciative if the sticks were not licked quite so clean.

THE OMNIVOROUS CROW

By Ronald E. Bainbridge, Ranger-Naturalist

The hike up the trail toward Mono Pass had been exceedingly pleasant. The day was bright and cloudless while a slight breeze cooled us as we rested among the pines - just catching a breather before we continued up to the pass at an elevation of 10,600 feet. The sun was overhead and that empty feeling indicated that lunch time should not be far off. We had left the forest of the lodgepole pine behind and had ascended into the realm of the whitebark pine - the last tree to make a stand at the higher elevations. Here these slow-growing trees were straight and tall; at higher elevations we would find them hugging the ground as a matted shrub.

Far down the slope I heard the harsh, raucous *kra-a, kra-a* that told me that the Clark's crow, or nutcracker, king of this whitebark forest, was near. His presence indicated that timberline was not far off. Closer at hand I noticed one which had alighted on a pine growing in a beautiful little mountain meadow bordering Parker Pass Creek. With the aid of my binoculars I was able to clearly see this regal bird - light gray, almost a foot long, black of wing and tail blended with patches of white. I well understood his preference for the whitebark pine because he is primarily a seed eater. The nuts of the pine cones are his staple. Moreover, I had heard that when pine nuts are not to be found, he hunts ants, beetles, grasshoppers and other insects. Some call him a scavenger.

However, I was distracted by other movement - movement in the tall meadow grass just under the tree. It seemed that another Clark's crow was doing a peculiar jig, for he was jumping and fluttering up and down. Soon his companion in the tree descended, joining him in this queer dance. My curiosity was fully aroused. I had to get closer for a better look. My approach frightened the birds and they quickly flew off.

An examination of the grassy dance floor showed the reason for their strange actions. A yong picket pin or Belding ground squirrel, no more than five inches long, lay injured, cut in several places by the pick-axe-like beaks of the crows.

We had interferred with the l[illegible] ing habits of the omnivorous c[illegible] Not only is he a vegetarian and sect eater, but apparently he is q[illegible] willing to work for fresh meat! [illegible] placed the wounded and b[illegible] frightened ground squirrel in a t[illegible] clump of willow. Did the picket die of his wounds, or did the Cla[illegible] nutcrackers return and finish job? I have since wondered. did he survive, much wiser for experience? Only the little gro[illegible] squirrel or the hungry Clark's cr[illegible] can tell the end of this tale.

Mammoth Peak from Dana Meadows

—*Ralph Anderson*

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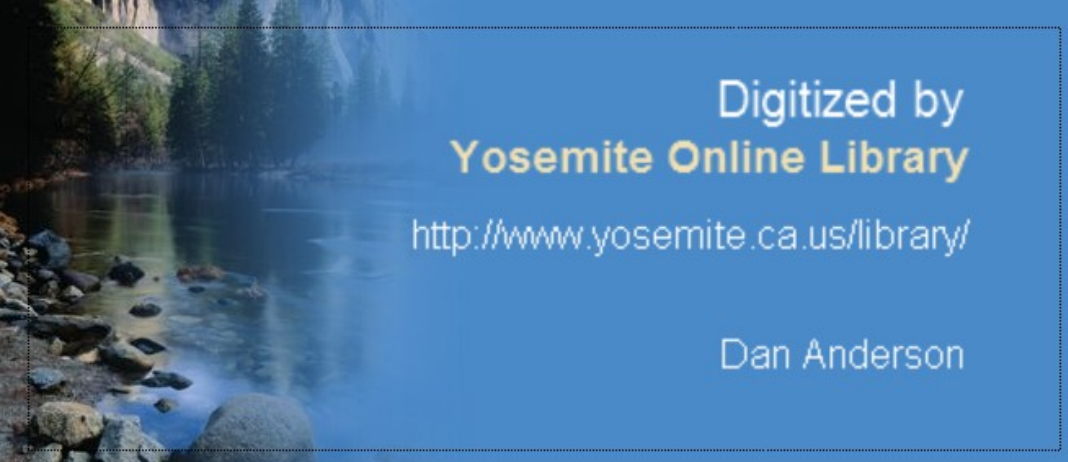
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