

YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES



Volume IV

July 28, 1925

Number 10

THE YOSEMITE NATURAL HISTORY ASSOCIATION ITS PURPOSES

1. To gather and disseminate information on the wild-life of the Sierras.
2. To develop and enlarge the Yosemite Museum (in co-operation with the National Park Service) and to establish subsidiary units, such as the Glacier Point lookout and branches of similar nature.
3. To promote the educational work of the Yosemite Nature Guide Service.
4. To publish (in co-operation with the U. S. National Park Service) "Yosemite Nature Notes".
5. To study living conditions, past and present, of the Indians of the Yosemite region.
6. To maintain in Yosemite Valley a library of historical, scientific, and popular interest.
7. To further scientific investigation along lines of greatest popular interest and to publish, from time to time, bulletins of non-technical nature.
8. To strictly limit the activities of the association to purposes which shall be scientific and educational, in order that the organization shall not be operated for profit.

MAY WE SEND YOU EACH ISSUE OF YOSEMITE NATURE NOTES?

Your check for \$2.00 sent to the Park Naturalist, Yosemite National Park, will help to pay the cost of its publication for one year and make you a member of the Yosemite Natural History Association for the same period.

FROM THE NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON OUT-DOOR RECREATION

Called by PRESIDENT COOLIDGE

"THAT THE CONFERENCE ENDORSE NATURE STUDY IN SCHOOLS AND THE EXTENSION OF THE NATURE STUDY IDEA TO EVERY AMERICAN SCHOOL AND FAMILY; THAT THE ESTABLISHMENT OF MUSEUMS OF NATURAL HISTORY IN NATIONAL PARKS WILL INCREASE THE EDUCATIONAL RECREATIONAL VALUE OF THE PARKS".—Resolution of the Conference.



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A MYSTERIOUS VOICE

By ROLAND CASE ROSS

THOSE who travel the higher trails in spring and summer are usually mystified by a peculiar booming sound. A leisurely series of low soft "tumps" is almost certain to be heard when one is in the forests of fir, or along the canyon sides clothed with Douglas spruce. From the sombre, silent depths of these thick forests the slow beats, similar to that of a tom-tom, are hard to locate and seem to fill the air in a most indefinite manner. When heard from considerable distance—and it can be heard a mile—the low-voiced repetition has the effect of deep grunting.

To many wood's travelers such deep and indefinable sounds are a bit ominous, and, to put it mildly, cause a good deal of curiosity. The nature guides are frequently asked by returning hikers what the slow booming is. Nearly all agree it is not an owl, and that it is too big a sound for the mountain pigeon—the band-tail. If the listener is of the kind who want to do their own finding out, he can with patience work out the puzzle. By moving along a base line, such as a trail, and listening for the voice at different locations, one will be enabled to determine the general direction from which the sound comes. Each listening point compared with one or two others on the same line will give converging lines of direction focusing at the point of origin. Following up this direction and repeating the process at times will bring one close to the source.

Then the real hunt begins. A person will pass the spot and find the booming sounds behind him. Close scrutiny of the ground and thickets will often fail to expose the hooter, for usually the mysterious sound comes from the dense cover of a fir tree, and high up. When then the secret is not out; by quiet and concealed watching the reward is obtained. If the right tree has been located and the eye is quick to see movement, then one has a good chance to observe one of nature's wild children secretly, with liberating voice challenging others of his kind.

As one scans at length both the silent and upreach of the particular tree a slight movement appears high up and close in toward the

trunk. It turns out to be a rather longish neck craning and peering down to see if the disturber below has passed. Perhaps the whole figure moves into sight, stepping along the limbs and wobbling for balance at times. It is a fowl; a fair-sized bird, as big as a hen of tame poultry.

If fortune favors, the bird performs. The neck puffs out to immense size, showing much bare yellow skin. The bird begins some half-bowing antics and the hollow "toomp" rings forth; and another and another. It is the love call of the cock Sierra grouse.

Though the calling bird is somewhat perplexing to one unused to his high-perching habits and illusive voice, the grouse as a rule are the most tame of birds. Indeed in unfrequented regions "blue grouse" are so fearless and gaze so stupidly at the passing trailsman that pioneers and natives of such regions call them "fool-hens." A little persecution, however, puts them in a different spirit and they roar out from forest thickets in startling suddenness and disappear in the heavy timber. It is a pleasure to note the unbroken confidence of Sierra Grouse in the Yosemite National Park. Hen birds bring their flocks to campers' dooryards, and even to the tables at mountain hotels. Preferred food is taken from under the very feet and lowered hands of cautious, quiet visitors.

Though the dark, sooty-blue fowl, so heavy of body, and short of leg, appear to be fit birds for the table, and they are good eating, as is well known, yet we find that a killed bird lasts but a moment; a confiding wild-fowl lives always in one's choicest memory.



MUSEUM NOTES

THE NATURE GUIDE SERVICE A SOURCE OF INFORMATION

By DR. H. C. BRYANT

A doctor and his wife whose life hobbies have been the collection and study of shells arrived in Yosemite last week. At home they left collections known the country over. These collections are but the remainder of the specimens which had not been exchanged or donated to museums. Wonderful Yosemite scenery did not quench their desire to seek new shells. Before these conchologists had spent a day in the valley they were inquiring of resort officials whether any snails or other mollusks had ever been found in the valley. They were incorrectly informed that none were to be found. Finally someone suggested that they visit the Yosemite museum. After listening to a geology talk by a naturalist, they introduced themselves and then inquired about their quest. How their faces lighted up as they were told of the work of two other conchologists in the valley and of the discovery of a land snail near Vernal Falls, which was named after the valley and of the small bivalve mollusk inhabiting Mirror lake. They were last seen headed for the foot of Yosemite falls, bent on finding the rare species of land snail about which they had been told.

The same day a representative of the Bureau of Plant Industry of the United States Department of Agriculture arrived from Washington seeking plants belonging to the genus *Berberus*. The question was put many times: "Are there any species of the genus *Berberus* in Yosemite National Park?" No one seemed to know until the question was put to the park naturalist, and the government plant pathologist went away feeling content that no species of this genus was abundant in the park.

Six years ago such interested persons would have searched in vain for reliable scientific information regarding the flora or fauna of the park, for those were the years before there was a nature guide service or a park naturalist. In recent years thousands of inquiries of like sort have been satisfactorily answered by the Yosemite nature guide service.

INTERESTING INDIAN ARTIFACTS COME TO LIGHT

The unusual amount of construction work going on in Yosemite this summer has resulted in a number of finds which have enriched the ethnological collections of the Yosemite Museum. Workmen engaged in building a roadway at the mouth of Indian Canyon unearthed the first perfect specimen of stone bowl found within the park. It is carved from steatite (soapstone) and has a capacity of about two cups. When Maggie Howard, a squaw residing within Yosemite valley, was questioned as to what she knew of such an object, she said: "I see old people without teeth pound deer meat in stone bowl." Dr. Gifford of the anthropology department University of California, states that bowls were so used for pulverizing meat and that they also served as mortars in which were prepared emetics. This specimen has two well-worn grooves on the lower surface in which arrow shafts were rubbed to make them smooth. W. B. Campbell of Yosemite purchased the bowl from the finder and loaned it to the Yosemite Museum. A cache of obsidian blades was found at Fort Monroe by men engaged in road work, and five of the fourteen crude implements found were secured by Mr. Campbell and presented to the museum. Frank Ewing has since added others of the original cache to those first presented.

Ranger Freeland recognized in a rounded cobblestone found at Fort Monroe an artifact of unusual interest. A conical hole, two inches deep and a half inch in diameter at the surface has been worn into the stone with some pointed object—probably a rotating stick used in firemaking.

Three splendid spear points have been found. One of them is white flint instead of the usual obsidian so extensively used by the local Indians. This implement was imported from other regions, for there is no supply of such material within Yosemite.

Mrs. Mary Bronson of Stockton has donated a part of thirty pounds of ancient red and white beads unearthed by Alvin Bronson in 1892 when digging a ditch at El Portal, just below Yosemite. This great wealth of beads had been buried with the remains of one Indian—C. P. Russell.

AFIELD WITH THE NATURE GUIDES.

A YOUNG, OIL-SOAKED ROBIN

While fishing along the Merced river a short way above the Old Village, with Nature Guide Leo Wilson, I noticed a peculiar movement in some grass by one of the cloughs. On investigating we found a full-grown young robin absolutely soaked with the oil that had been placed on the water to kill the mosquito larvae. The bird was scarcely able to move, the feathers being so thoroughly soaked.

In all probability the bird had been bathing and had gotten its wings drenched in the oil and in its efforts to fly had fallen into the middle of one of the pools to become an oily, shapeless mass that could scarcely be recognized as a bird.

The parents were present and showed much concern at our close scrutiny of the sad-looking victim.

Whether this bird could finally clean itself and once again fly is a question. I doubt it, for I feel that when the sun happened to strike the bird the oil would simply "burn" it up.

We left it, however, and hope it lived.—D. D. McLean.

* * *

BLACK SWIFTS IN YOSEMITE

Black Swifts have been seen now and then in Yosemite for some time, but no nests have ever actually been discovered. However, on June 14, while near the Government machine shops, I did see the birds entering a crack in the cliff about 300 yards up the north wall of the valley.

The birds when first noted were sailing about low over the buildings in company with numerous white-throated swifts and violet-green swallows. Nine were in sight at one time, whereas at least forty of the white-throated birds were dashing about. The white-throats flew rapidly this way and that, screeching continually, but the big black fellows sailed about very calmly with only an occasional twitter. Two birds came down so close that they barely skimmed over the top of the machine shop.

They finally began to circle and rise higher and higher. Two of the birds went directly toward the cliff and entered one after the other into a crack in the granite wall. After about a minute, one of the birds came out and flew off across the valley. The other did not appear for at least a minute longer, when it sailed out and followed in the same general direction that the other had taken.

Several times since then I have seen the birds flying over the shops but have not been up at the foot of the cliff to see if they were still entering the same crack.—D. D. McLean.

A PUGNACIOUS ROBIN

While walking along the edge of the Stoneman meadow with a nature class from Camp Curry, we happened upon an unusual sight. We were searching in a wild rose and Azalea thicket for a Thrall flycatcher who was uttering his twisted note, when suddenly, in front of us, dashed two birds, a robin and a sharp-shinned hawk.

There was a pursuer and a pursued, but the usual order was reversed, for the robin hotly pursued the sharp-shin—flying slightly above him she harried the hawk and hit him once with her breast. The reverse order was not to the liking of the fierce little killer and he fled with his best speed.—Enid Michael.

Visits to Birds' Nests

Furnish Thrills

Birds' nests in great variety are furnishing thrills to those who follow a nature guide in Yosemite this month. Wonderfully chiseled nests of three varieties of woodpecker, the mud and straw nest of the Western robin, the saddled nest of the wood peewee, the poorly made nest of the black-headed grosbeak, and the beautifully woven nest of the Cassin vireo, camouflaged with spider egg cases, have furnished variety enough to form a basis for worthwhile studies in nidology.

Habits and mannerisms of nesting birds are even more interesting than their workmanship. The teamwork shown by a pair of black-headed grosbeaks or a pair of the warbling or the Cassin vireo has appealed to many. These birds divide up the labor of housekeeping and the male takes his turn at incubating the eggs, often singing while keeping the eggs warm.—H. C. BRYANT.

FLOWER SEASON

The succession from spring to summertime is nowhere shown more clearly than in the plant world. Certain flowers are characteristic of certain seasons and we normally expect to find the same flowers blooming year after year at the same period.

The annuals of the floor of the valley on the northern exposed slopes have passed their prime, whereas the same species in similar locations on the rim are just coming into their fullest beauty. The summer is much delayed at the higher altitudes, as the plant life clearly shows. On the valley floor the meadows are the interesting spots for the botanist. The large assortment of water-loving plants is just starting to color the green meadows. Among the commoner flowers blooming in the meadows now we find Yarrow, Harvest Brodiaea, Little Leopard Lily, Sneezewood, Mariposa Lily, Geranium, the others. A trip into the wet grassland will well repay the flower lover.—David D. Keck.

REPTILIAN COURTING ANTICS

The period of courtship brings about queer antics among the males of the species throughout the animal kingdom. The best and worst sides of each group, from man to the lowest forms are alternately exhibited when the period arrives to select a mate.

In the Yosemite region many curious sights are to be seen during the mating season. Gaudily colored male birds strut about, with wings and tails spread, in order that the brilliant colors may more readily dazzle the coy females.

In at least one reptilian species occurring in the Yosemite National Park this same instinct to "show off" exists. That species is the blue-bellied or fence lizard.

This lizard is strictly a rock dweller, living and breeding on the great granite boulders at the rim of the valley. At Glacier Point this reptile is particularly abundant, running rapidly over the surface of the great rocks, catching its insect food, and just at this season indulging in a curious courting caper.

As the name would indicate, the belly of the fence lizard is covered with a mass of beautiful dark blue scales. When the male has selected the female that is to be the object of his attentions, he immediately assumes a prominent position on a projecting boulder. From this place the courting performance takes place.

Gradually the body of the reptile is inflated with air until it is nearly twice the ordinary size. Then, with throat and belly greatly distended, the animal begins a sort of bobbing, raising the body on all four legs until it is well above the rock, repeating this operation at frequent intervals.

During this bobbing process the blue under coloring is brought in full view, and in the bright sunlight is really quite a dazzling sight.

At times, as many as five males are busy at once, all paying their respects to one female. Such a sight presents a blaze of color as might charm the senses of the most blase of the reptilian tribe.

* * *

A NIGHTLY VISIT FROM A FLYING SQUIRREL

Our feeding table for the birds had been kept heaped with food. Each morning it was empty. At first we thought the birds, being about long before we arose, might have been responsible for the clean-up. Responsibility was finally fixed on a night visitor. One evening a scratching noise on the bark of a nearby pine attracted our attention to a most beautiful animal with large eyes, silky fur and flattened tail. He cautiously approached the feeding table, keeping in the shadow; grabbed a piece of bread and scurried up the tree. We could follow him after he had climbed

high in the tree. Later he glided from a point about twelve feet up on a tree trunk to the ground, then scurried along to the feeding table, got his piece of bread and went up the tree again.

Thus we were able to get a splendid look at that famous nocturnal squirrel called the Flying Squirrel, so called because of its ability to volplane from tree to tree by means of the skin stretched between front and hind legs. Undoubtedly this individual has a home in some hollow in a tree or old woodpecker's nest somewhere near. The flying squirrel is not a mammal that can be readily searched out and studied. Rather it is one that usually escapes detection. Yosemite appears to be one of the places where patience may reward one's search for the most interesting animal.—H. C. Bryant.

A COMMON LANGUAGE AMONG BIRDS

Birds have an interspecies language by which they can express themselves in terms of fear or excitement. Also among many of the smaller birds there is a strongly developed spirit of mutual aid. The above facts may be verified by anyone of an observing state of mind.

One morning recently I was strolling up the valley toward Camp Curry and when I reached a point on the road opposite the river-bank where nest the Kingfishers and the Rough-winged Swallows, I detoured for a visit with these interesting birds. As I approached the river I suddenly realized that some thing unusual was going on. All the birds of the neighborhood were banded together in protest against some common enemy. Juncos were snapping out their short cliky notes, a pair of jays were screaming, a robin spoke in short, choppy squeals and a pair of vireos, each in turn, rattled off scolding notes. Directly below the cedar tree in which most of the excited birds were gathered was a camper's tent. At first I thought a weasel must be about, and watched, expecting any moment to see a lean, yellow-bodied animal appear from under the tent platform. Several minutes I waited; nothing happened, but the excitement continued. By moving about I was able to get more nearly the point of view of the birds, and then was disclosed the cause of all the excitement. The birds had discovered a new enemy that had moved into their midst. Domesticated cats are common in Yosemite valley and the birds no doubt have every reason to know of their evil ways, but the cat that was now causing the excitement did not look like a cat. It seemed to me that the birds showed remarkable perspicacity in recognizing this strange angora beast as a cat—their most dreaded enemy.—Erid Michael.

A PERSONAL INVITATION.

YOSEMITE NATIONAL PARK IS YOURS! WE OF THE NATIONAL PARK SERVICE WANT TO HELP YOU TO MAKE FRIENDS WITH YOUR PARK AND TO UNDERSTAND IT IN ITS EVERY MOOD. ALL OF THE FOLLOWING SERVICE IS OFFERED TO YOU *free* BY YOUR GOVERNMENT:

Visit the Yosemite Museum!

Here you will learn the full story of the Park — what tools were used by the great Sculptor in carving this mighty granite-walled gorge; who lived here before the white man came; how the Days of Gold led to Yosemite's discovery; how the pioneers prepared the way for you; and how the birds and mammals and trees and flowers live together in congenial communities waiting to make your acquaintance.

Plan your trail trips on the large scale models in the Geography Room.

The Yosemite Library in the museum provides references on all phases of Yosemite history and natural history.

Popular lectures on Yosemite geology and other branches of natural history are given by nature guides at scheduled times each day.

The nature guide on duty will be more than willing to answer your questions on any subject.

Go Afield with a Nature Guide!

Take advantage of this free service that will help you to know your Park. A competent scientist will conduct you over Yosemite trails, and from him you may learn first hand of the native flowers, trees, birds, mammals, and geological features.

See Schedule of Nature Guide Field Trips.

Visit Glacier Point Lookout!

From there you will obtain an unexcelled view of Yosemite's High Sierra. The binocular telescope will bring Mt. Lyell to within one third of a mile from where you stand; you can recognize friends climbing trails several miles away. The Nature Guide in attendance will help you to operate it and will explain what you see.

A small library is at your command.

You will enjoy the informal nightly campfire talks given here.

Attend the Nature Guide Campfire Talks!

In addition to the museum lectures members of the educational staff give talks as a part of the evening program at Camp Curry and Yosemite Lodge. Non-technical explanations of how Yosemite came to be; what you may expect of Yosemite bears; how the local Indians lived; what birds you see about your camps; what trout you will catch in Yosemite waters; how you may best visit the wonderland of the summit region; and scores of similar subjects are given by the National Park Service Nature Guides.

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Dan Anderson