

Bulletin No. 2
March 1, 1932
Stencil No. 65

Vol. 2

A TWENTY-FIVE YEAR SURVEY OF THE ANIMALS OF
SEQUOIA NATIONAL PARK - 1906-1931

By

Judge Walter Fry

America's National Parks are "maintained in unimpaired form for the use of future generations as well as those of our own time." To most people this means the protection of scenic features and the preservation of the deer, bears and other animals or birds commonly seen by park visitors. A less noticeable but highly important work of conservation in the National Parks is the maintenance of the natural balance of wild life; that is, complete, or practically complete, protection for all forms of wild life, even for the so-called vermin or predatory animals and birds, such as the lion, wild cats, racoons, skunks, foxes, eagles, hawks and owls.

The benefits of such complete conservation in the Sequoia National Park is clearly shown by the records kept by Judge Walter Fry over a period of twenty-five years, and the following bulletin expresses his observations. A notable result of the natural balance may be observed in the control of ground squirrels, which, within the park, are kept down by the other so-called vermin; poisoning being rarely if ever necessary.

In comparing wild life of today with that of twenty-five years ago, many changes are noted: some species have increased, others have held their own, some have lagged behind, and others have vanished from the area.

Bears and deer have increased at least sixty percent. Mountain and valley coyotes, skunks, weasels, porcupines, pikas, rats, mice, gophers, moles, shrews, mountain beavers, and bats have held their own. Mountain lions, lynxes, fishers, martins, minks, foxes, racoons, ringtailed cats, marmots, squirrels, chipmunks, hares and rabbits (other than the California jack rabbit), have decreased about forty percent. Mountain sheep, wolverines, and badgers are verging on extinction. Four mountain sheep were reported seen by tourists on the western slope of Mt. Whitney last year, and their tracks have been reported on Sugar Loaf Creek this year. Wolverine tracks have been reported on Kern River this year, while badgers have been noted at Willow Meadow. The last wolverines taken in the vicinity of the park, of which we have record, were the five trapped during the winter of 1924-25. Two were taken at Big Meadow, two at Mineral King, and one at River Valley. Of the five taken, four were males and one female. They were all beautiful specimens and in fine condition. This trapping near the boundaries has of course, been responsible for diminishing the fur-bearing animals.

Two native species, the gray wolf and the California jack rabbit, have disappeared. The only gray wolf seen within the park since the time of its creation was one killed by Charlie Howard at Wolverton, September 25, 1908. Mr. Howard at the time was slaughtering beef for a troupe of soldiers, and the wolf came up within fifty yards of his camp in broad daylight and was eating on some of the beef offal. It was a large male in fairly good condition, but quite old, as evidenced by badly worn teeth. California plains jack-rabbits have always inhabited sparingly a small area at Shepherd Cove and Ash Mountain within the park; but during the summer season of 1918, when poisoned grain was put out along the park boundary to kill ground squirrels, it not only killed the squirrels but the rabbits as well. None of the rabbits have been seen within the park since August 25th of that year.

The opossum, an animal foreign to the region, has recently arrived in the park. These animals are one result of the drought of 1924, when the waters over their breeding grounds, some fifteen miles west of the park dried up. As the waters dried out, the opossums kept following up the Kaweah River into the mountain section, until they reached the park on September of that year. Quite a large colony of the animals is reported living at Camp Potwisha in the park. The opossums are descendants from stock imported from Missouri some twenty-five years ago and liberated a short distance east of Visalia.

I have not listed the California Grizzly bears in this report, because we have never considered them a resident of the park; although at very rare intervals individual animals have been reported within the park, and a few have been killed west of the park. From 1921 to 1922, a large bear seen at various times within the park was, undoubtedly, a grizzly. This is possibly the bear killed at Horse Corral by Jesse Agnew in 1922.

So comparing the wild animals of Sequoia National Park of 1931 with those of the first survey of 1906, twenty-five years ago, we find the following changes:

Of the 63 known species that inhabited the park in 1906, 2 have increased, 35 have held their own, 21 have been greatly reduced, 3 are verging on extinction, and 2 have disappeared. One animal has been added, the opossum, which now gives 62 different species of animals within the park today.

I look for a marked increase of animals within the park in the next quarter century. This increase may be attributed to enlargement of the park and the creation of the Sequoia National Game Refuge, which took place in 1926. This prevents hunting and trapping in the new area and adjacent territory, and has increased the breeding and feeding grounds about three fold.

It is indeed fortunate that we have the National Parks, not only because they preserve animals that would otherwise be exterminated, but because they illustrate the benefits of complete conservation and the maintenance of the natural balance of wild life, so often carelessly upset by man in his killing and poisoning campaigns.