

SIX ANIMAL CONTRASTS IN SEQUOIA NATIONAL PARK

By
Judge Walter Fry

There are 61 different species of wild animals known to be native to Sequoia National Park. Some species closely resemble others in size, appearance, and habits, while others differ to a degree that is almost incomprehensible. It seems to me that there are six different species which offer interesting contrasts: The bears are the largest and the shrews the smallest; the wolverine the most fierce and hare the most timid; the coney the most intelligent and skunk the most dumb.

Bears vs. Shrews

The average adult black and brown bear weighs 500 pounds; but an adult Sierra Nevada Shrew with a full stomach weighs barely one ounce, a difference in weight of 499 pounds and 15 ounces. A bear cub at birth is smaller in proportion to the size of the mother than any other animal of the park, weighing approximately 16 ounces, or 1/500th part of the weight of the mother; while a baby shrew at birth weighs about one dram, or one 16th part the weight of the mother. The bears belong to the Order Ferae, and the shrew to the Order Insectivora; thus both are largely flesh eating animals. A full grown bear will consume and digest about 20 pounds of flesh in 24 hours, which is about 1/25th of its weight; while the adult shrew will consume and digest about 18 drams of flesh in 24 hours, its own weight and 1/8th over.

Wolverine vs. Snow-Shoe Rabbit

The wolverine is the most fierce animal of the park. A wolverine will fight to the death. Other carnivorous animals of the park, through long experience, have come to realize that the wolverine is an animal that must be killed to be conquered and they leave him strictly alone. Bears, mountain lions, and mountain coyotes have been seen in recent years to give up their food quickly upon the approach of a wolverine.

At the other extreme is the Sierra Hare or Snow-Shoe Rabbit. Fear is a ruling passion of this animal; fear governs their every day life. So sensitive are the animals to fear that they seldom relax sufficiently to enjoy life in play and pastime. The animals live and breed on top of the ground so are exposed to every passing enemy by night and by day, from the hour of birth to the hour of death. The life of the Sierra Hare is short at most. If it were not for the fact that the animals have a burst of speed that is hard to match, keenest of sight and hearing, and a changed protective coloring that blends with their surroundings at different seasons of the year, they never could have survived down to the present time.

Coney vs. Skunk

To me the Sierra Nevada Pika, commonly called the "Coney", is the most intelligent of all our park animals. These little rodents, closely allied to rabbits, are the remnant of a very ancient family that has been distanced in the evolutionary race. The survivors have either thrust themselves or have become thrust by other animals into a mountainous region that other animals

could not occupy. Their homes are in rock-slides bordering on upper timber line where they live in colony groups in perfect peace and harmony, foraging on the herbage growing around the slides in summer. They harvest a hay crop and store it in their hay-barns to tide them over winter. The hay-making season is roughly speaking between August 20th and September 15th, varying somewhat with altitude and ripening condition of the groups. The harvest season is a busy time for the animals and practically all members of the colony take part. The one serious object is to store sufficient food supply to tide over the winter. This is no small matter either as the winters in this locality often cover periods ranging from seven to eight months, with snow falling in depths from ten to thirty feet and covering all vegetation. So it is plain that any failure of judgment in the matter of storing sufficient food supply to tide them over the winter would result in their extermination. Of course, there are other animals that store away food supply, but none have I noted that does it with the intelligence and precision as that of the Coney.

The conies have long been recognized by man as a true resident of the mountains. We find them mentioned in the Bible in Psalms Chapter 104, verse 18, 1520 years B.C., when speaking upon a meditation upon the power and providence of God, as follows: "The high hills are a refuge for the wild goats; and the rocks for the conies". Again we note in Proverbs, Chapter 30, verse 26, 700 years B.C., when speaking of four things exceeding wise, the following: "The conies are but a feeble folk, yet make their home in the rocks". Thus we know of the conies' residence in the mountains for at least 3,454 years. How much longer they will continue to remain rests with the intelligence of the animals and the protection that will be afforded by mankind.

Of all the animals of the park the California Skunk seems to me the most dumb. These animals seem to believe that their method of offense and defense is all that is necessary to save them. As one illustration of their ignorance: In July, 1906, a California Skunk entered my chicken coop by digging under the side wall; it killed 36 little chickens in one night. On the following night I set a large wolf trap, having nothing smaller, at the entrance hole, and on the following morning found that a California Skunk had sprung the trap and that the strength of the trap springs had cut off his left front foot at the knee joint. Again I set the trap, with the result that on the following morning I found, to my surprise and amazement, that the same skunk had again returned and sprung the trap which had caught him by the right front foot where he was held fast. I know of no other of the park animals that would be so ignorant as to perform a fool trick like this.

Sequoia National Park is a wonderful place for the observation and study of wild animal life. Here we find the free and untrammelled wild animals living in their natural haunts, busily working out their own destiny unhindered by man, and see what the animals think and do by their own initiative, thus contrasting their differences in many ways.