

THE BUSHY-TAILED WOOD RAT

Stencil No. 70

Trickster and Thief

by
Judge Walter Fry

When traveling through the mountains of the High Sierra, have you met the Bushy-tailed Wood Rat? If not you have missed something worth while for this rat is the most peculiar looking of all the rat family, and takes special delight in playing trickish pranks on you or robbing you outright of your belongings. Ord gave to this species of rat the scientific name of "*Neotoma cinerea cinerea*", but many years ago people aptly applied to the animal the common names of "Pack Rat or Trade Rat". This is appropriate, for they will sometimes carry off your belongings and hide them in their dens and at other times they will carry off articles of value leaving other articles of no value in exchange.

Roughly speaking, the Bushy-tailed Wood Rat inhabits the Sequoia National Park between the altitudes of from 6,000 to 12,000 feet, but are not abundant anywhere. They den in piles of rock and rock crevices and under logs. To the casual observer the species would hardly be taken for a rat. Despite a certain superficial resemblance in size and appearance to the house or wharf rat, with their coarse hair and bare tails, the Wood Rat is a far more attractive animal, clothed with soft fluffy fur, delicately colored on upper portions of body and top of tail in soft shades of sandy brown; while the feet and under parts of body and tail are pure white. The tail is fully covered with long hairs extending out laterally from the sides as to form a flat brush. They are mainly nocturnal in habits, and for this reason are seldom seen by park visitors. The rats will eat most anything, and are very fond of nuts, berries, flesh, and cereals. When pressed they can run and climb rapidly.

The actions of these mountain tricksters at times are a source of mingled amusement and enjoyment, but at other times may lead up vexation of a serious nature, and may cause friction between campers in the mountains. Such was the case betwixt Professor W. F. Dean and myself many years ago:

On the evening of September 29, 1899, we established camp about one-half mile south-east of Castle Rocks within Sequoia National Park, altitude 8,900 feet. When we retired for the night we spread our blankets on the ground and as the weather was quite cold we decided to sleep with part of our clothing on, only removing our hats, shoes, and coats; the latter however, we used for pillows. Dean took from his pocket a money bag containing three twenty dollar gold pieces and a small amount of silver, also his spectacle case containing his gold-rimmed spectacles and placed them in his hat at the side of our bed. When we awoke on the following morning we found that the money and spectacles were gone from Dean's hat and in their stead was a round ball of horse dung somewhat larger than a walnut. Dean asked me what kind of a trick was I trying to play on him, and when I told him I knew nothing about the matter he gave me a look of savage suspicion such as I never will forget. I know he thought I had the missing articles and I expected him to start fighting me at any moment. It must be remembered that neither of us at that time knew anything about the antics of the bush-tailed wood rat.

After breakfast, we threw a canvas over our camp equipment and left afoot to inspect the boundaries of the 480 acres that Dean owned at that time in the vicinity and which he wanted to rent to me for grazing purposes. The trip was a strenuous one and neither of us had much to say. Only twice was the monotony broken; once when we got into a yellowjackets nest - both getting badly stung, and another time when we slid down over some rocks into a willow thicket almost on top of a mother bear and her two cubs. When we arrived back at camp about dusk we saw a bushy tailed wood rat scampering from our camp equipage with a spoon in his mouth to a nearby rock pile that surrounded a survey stake. Quickly we removed the rock pile, and down on the ground near its center beside a soft grassy nest near a large hole in the ground we found not only the money and spectacles, but as well, our two table knives, forks, and spoons.

Never shall I forget the above incident and the innocent deception which caused both of us some eleven hours of continuous worry and came mighty nigh to destroying what proved later a life long friendship between us.

On another occasion, the night of August 7, 1913, while tenting out with a detachment of soldiers at Alta Meadow, Sequoia National Park, elevation 8,600 feet, we observed one of these mountain marauders busily engaged in exchanging articles that belonged to us. At the time Sergeant John McCall and I were lying on our cots in a tent reading by a dimly lighted candle, when, about 9 o'clock, we observed one of the rats slyly enter our tent through the flap door with a small bone in its mouth. He came alongside a sack of potatoes where one potato was lying on the ground; and, dropping the bone, he picked up the potato, scrambled up over a pile of stovewood onto a wash-bench where he found a small cake of castile soap. Here he dropped his potato, took a bite of the soap, picked up the cake and jumped onto the ground near an 8 inch saw file. He examined the saw-file thoroughly, then picked up his soap and went on to the side of McCall's cot where McCall's large corn cob pipe was lying; here he dropped his soap, sniffed into the pipe, sneezed a couple of times, picked up the pipe and went on over to where there were a couple of cavalry spurs lying. After a thorough examination of the spurs he picked up one of them and started dragging it from the tent. Right then and there we drove the rat out into the night.

I have made a long study of the bushy-tailed wood rat, and at one time I despised them for their depredations. But of recent years I have come to admire the little rascals for their intelligence. Their trickery and their thievery are not intended for evil purposes, but are an effort to obtain something of unusual attractiveness to decorate their homes. Furthermore, the forests of our mountains and National Parks would be lacking without them, so lets not hold prejudice against them - thieves and tricksters though they be.