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Sequoia National Park threatened by Invaders

Never in the history of Sequoia National Park has the reservation been so seriously threatened with invasion as at present. The invaders are not a lawless and undesirable people, but on the contrary, a strange and mysterious animal, the likes of which but few California natives have ever been privileged to see.

It is one of the important aims of the National Park Service to promote in every way possible the wild life within the National Parks, but the service is equally consistent in its efforts to prevent the introduction of species foreign to the region. Notwithstanding all this, here come these strange and foreign invaders, all of which are headed straight for the Sequoia National Park from three different directions, and Uncle Sam is practically helpless to stop them.

The animal that is causing all the disturbance and anxiety on the part of the Park Service is one of an ancient race known as the "Marsupialia", but in this locality is commonly called the Missouri O'possum. Yes, Missouri 'Possum!

'Possums from Missouri, that's what the people say,
Moving to Sequoia and now well on their way;
'Possums coming singly and others come in pairs,
Mothers carrying baby ones in pouches lined with hair;
Big 'possums, little 'possums, lean ones and fat,
All moving to Sequoia. Now what do you think of that?

'Possums from Missouri that we read of in the book,
Seldom seen in the day time but this is how they look;
Long nose, short ears, feet brown and bare,
Bodies clad in silvery coats, tails long, without hair;
Daddy 'possums, mamma 'possums and baby ones you know,
All marching to Sequoia where the tall timbers grow.

'Possums from Missouri, that is what we say,
All coming to Sequoia our laws to disobey;
Some come in the day time, others in the dark,
All bent on the one intent to reach Sequoia Park;
Must we stand and guard the lines or must we let them through,
Or shall we wire the Director and ask him what to do?

'Possums from Missouri, that is what we've got,
All heading for Sequoia on the 'possum trot;
'Possums that will grin and growl, then feign that they are dead,
But this is just a camouflage to save their life instead;
Must we stand, must we fight, or shall we wheel and run,
Better phone the rangers to bring a Gatling-gun.

These 'possums first made their appearance in the Three Rivers district along the Kaweah River about 8 miles west of the park near the first of September of the present year. By the 25th of the month they had extended their migration up the South Fork River to the Alles Brothers ranch some 3 miles; and by the first of October they had moved up the East Fork and Middle Fork Rivers to the J. P. Godby place. This latter place is situated about one mile from the west park boundary. By recent observation it is found from the prints of their hand-like feet in the sands along the river the animals are now approaching the park boundary, if they are not already within the reservation.

When the 'possums first arrived in the Three Rivers district, citizens were at a loss to know what the animals were or from whence they came, for many of them had never before seen such an animal. Upon investigation it was found that the animals had undoubtedly drifted in from the Woodlake section, a distance of

some 16 miles below Three Rivers, and 20 miles below the Park. According to the best information obtainable, it seems beyond all doubt that the animals we now have are the product of ancestral stock brought a few years ago from Missouri and liberated in the district east of Visalia. It seems that the cause of their sudden migration to new territory is due to the great drought of last summer, which caused practically all streams to cease running in their former home. This being the case, the animals followed the dry bed of the Kaweah River to a point where they found running water in the mountainous district a few miles below Three Rivers.

War Opens off the 'Possums

The animals apparently made the first 8 mile lap of their migratory journey without any detection or molestation whatsoever. But when they started to run the 6 mile gauntlet line of settlement in the Three Rivers district it was then that misfortune befell them, which resulted in the death of many of their members and heavy persecution for others.

The Three Rivers people did not object to the 'possums special appetite for fruits, such as figs, oranges, grapes, apples, peaches, etc., but when they raided Henry Delong's hen-coop they incurred his wrath to such extent that right then and there he killed 26 of their number. Of these animals killed 3 were adult males, 2 adult females and 21 were young. The two females were carrying 9 and 12 young in their pouches, respectively. The young were about the size of a large mouse. The larger male opossum weighed over 10 pounds. A few days later Mr. Adam Alles located a mother 'possum and her 5 young under a rock pile at his ranch. They had been living on his garden. The young were about the size of a full grown rat. Mr. Alles never before having seen such animals, decided to make pets of them. He captured the entire outfit, put them in a pen, but within a few days they were all gone. A little later on Mr. J. P. Godby found that some kind of animals were living at his garbage pit. He set box traps and succeeded in capturing one adult male and one adult female opossum, which, at first thought, he intended to hold in captivity. But when he thought back over his boyhood days in Oklahoma and the 'possum hunts he had had there, he turned the animals free and the last he saw of them they were headed straight for Sequoia Park.

Family and Distribution

The opossum belongs to the order Marsupialia. Family Didelphiidae. Genus Didelphis. The species we have here is the "Didelphis virginiana". The opossum family comprises a group of closely related species all of which are peculiar to America. Their range extends from the Great Lakes, Wisconsin and Nebraska on the north, thence southward east of the Rocky Mountains to the gulf coast and into the tropics of Patagonia. Opossums have recently been introduced in various parts of California, but the animals seem very slow in gaining a foothold. They inhabit the wooded areas along streams and marshes and are seldom found living elsewhere.

An Animal of strange form and habits

Of all our North American mammals, to me the opossum is the strangest of any in form and habits. Their long pig-like snout, naked ears, hand-like feet, long hairless prehensile tail, and the pocket or pouch the females have in which they develop and carry their young, all of which combined, rank the animal as one of extraordinary characteristics. Then, too, their habit of "playing 'possum", in which they feign to be dead when come upon suddenly or when attacked, differs the animal from any other of our American mammals. As an example of this, once when I was a boy over in Illinois, I came suddenly upon a large male 'possum at the base of a big hickory tree where he was eating nuts. When the animal looked up and saw me standing beside him, he immediately hung his head and stood perfectly still with eyes partly closed and mouth half open. When I smote him gently on the back he gradually reeled over on his side, where he lay as if dead. All my efforts to revive him proved of no avail until I placed him under water in a creek near by. This transaction revived him and he came to the surface for air, but upon his looking up and seeing me standing near, he would quietly go under again, and all the while getting farther away. Finally he swam to the opposite bank of the creek and I never saw him again.

Breeding Habits

The breeding habits of the opossum are likewise different from those of our other American mammals. The young range from 5 to 15 in number, and it is doubtful if more than one litter is produced each year. Young are born in an embryonic condition and are transferred to teats located in an external pouch in the skin of the abdomen of the parent mother, where they complete their development. When the young are born and transferred to the pouch they are naked and formless little objects, and so firmly are they attached to the mother's teats in her pouch that they cannot be shaken loose. Later, when the young attain their coatings of fur they relinquish their hold on the teats but continue to occupy the pouch until the family becomes too large for it. The young continue to move about with their mother, some riding on her back, some clinging to her tail, and others walking. When the young are about half grown, the mother weans them, leaving them to shift for themselves.

Will the opossum thrive in Sequoia National Park

When once the opossum gains a foothold in the park no doubt they will increase very rapidly, as they are prolific breeders, and there is an abundance of food for them. But as to just what view some of the carnivorous predatory wild animals of the park will take of this new and freakish animal remains yet to be seen. Most of the carnivorous animals enjoy either a chase or fight when capturing their quarry, but Mr. opossum will give them neither but on the contrary just "plays 'possum". There are few animals that care about picking up another dead animal and shaking it, let alone stopping to eat it. Just imagine an old mountain coyote, perchance, charging upon a mother opossum with her family of 10 or 12 young, and about the time he arrived in their midst the entire family dropped dead. Do you suppose that coyote would stop to eat them? No sir! I am of the opinion that the coyote's better intelligence would say to him that something was radically wrong and he would immediately flee from the premises. This same thing which applies to the coyote might also be said regarding some other animals of the park.

Should Opossum be permitted to live in the Sequoia National Park or should they be exterminated?

I believe in the present policy of the National Park Service in its attempt to keep from the reservations species that are foreign to the region. If this were not so, the National Parks would soon become filled with many different kinds of species all foreign to the parks. Such procedure would practically ruin the parks from the natural and scientific standpoint. Or in other words, in case a person wishes to study the outdoor habits of a certain species of animal, bird, or flora, he must go to their natural haunts to do it; and with the gradual settlement of America the national parks may be the only regions left for such study.

But regarding the opossum; it seems now certain that we will have to accept him in Sequoia whether we want him or not. Furthermore, animals that are possessed with sufficient migratory instinct to carry them a distance of 20 miles to new environments when threatened by famine, wins for that animal a certain degree of admiration and respect that few people can ignore. Then too, owing to the peculiar manner in which the opossums have thrust themselves upon us, it would seem only fair on the part of the National Park Service to extend to the animals a welcome to their new Sequoia home. Anyhow, the animals cannot harm the park in any way, and their presence may result in much benefit, owing to their predatory habits in the destruction of harmful rodents. So let's give the opossum a chance.