

Muir John 1894. *The Mountains of California* . New York, The Century Co.

Muir, John, 1838-1914.

http://www.yosemite.ca.us/john_muir_writings/the_mountains_of_california/

Chapitre 1. *The Sierra Nevada*

Plants and animals, biding their time, closely followed the retiring ice, bestowing quick and joyous animation on the new-born landscapes. Pine-trees marched up the sun-warmed moraines in long, hopeful files, taking the ground and establishing themselves as soon as it was ready for them; brown-spiked sedges fringed the shores of the newborn lakes; young rivers roared in the abandoned channels of the glaciers; flowers bloomed around the feet of the great burnished domes, — while with quick fertility mellow beds of soil, settling and warming, offered food to multitudes of Nature's waiting children, great and small, animals as well as plants; mice, squirrels, **marmots**, deer, bears, elephants, etc. The ground burst into bloom with magical rapidity, and the young forests into birdsong: life in every form warming and sweetening and growing richer as the years passed away over the mighty Sierra so lately suggestive of death and consummate desolation only.

3. *The Snow* 36

THE first snow that whitens the Sierra, usually falls about the end of October or early in November, to a depth of a few inches, after months of the most charming Indian summer weather imaginable. But in a few days, this light covering mostly melts from the slopes exposed to the sun and causes but little apprehension on the part of mountaineers who may be lingering among the high peaks at this time. The first general winter storm that yields snow that is to form a lasting portion of the season's supply, seldom breaks on the mountains before the end of November. Then, warned by the sky, cautious mountaineers, together with the wild sheep, deer, and most of the birds and bears, make haste to the lowlands or foot-hills; and **burrowing marmots**, mountain beavers, wood rats, and such people go into winter quarters, some of them not again to see the light of day until the general awakening and resurrection of the spring in June or July. The first heavy fall is usually from about two to four feet in depth. Then, with intervals of splendid sunshine, storm succeeds storm, heaping snow on snow, until thirty to fifty feet has fallen. But on account of its settling and compacting, and the almost constant waste from melting and evaporation, the average depth actually found

at any time seldom exceeds ten feet in the forest region, or fifteen feet along the slopes of the summit peaks.

4. A Near View of the High Sierra

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All my first day was pure pleasure; simply mountaineering indulgence, crossing the dry pathways of the ancient glaciers, tracing happy streams, and learning the **habits of the birds and marmots** in the groves and rocks. Before I had gone a mile from camp, I came to the foot of a white cascade that beats its way down a rugged gorge in the cañon wall, from a height of about nine hundred feet, and pours its throbbing waters into the Tuolumne. I was acquainted with its fountains, which, fortunately, lay in my course. What a fine traveling companion it proved to be, what songs it sang, and how passionately it told the mountain's own joy! Gladly I climbed along its dashing border, absorbing its divine music, and bathing from time to time in waftings of irised spray. Climbing higher, higher, new beauty came streaming on the sight: painted meadows, late-blooming gardens, peaks of rare architecture, lakes here and there, shining like silver, and glimpses of the forested middle region and the yellow lowlands far in the west. Beyond the range I saw the so-called Mono Desert, lying dreamily silent in thick purple light—a desert of heavy sun-glare beheld from a desert of ice-burnished granite. Here the waters divide, shouting in glorious enthusiasm, and falling eastward to vanish in the volcanic sands and dry sky of the Great Basin, or westward to the Great Valley of California, and thence through the Bay of San Francisco and the Golden Gate to the sea.

How glorious a greeting the sun gives the mountains! To behold this alone is worth the pains of any excursion a thousand times over. The highest peaks burned like islands in a sea of liquid shade. Then the lower peaks and spires caught the glow, and long lances of light, streaming through many a notch and pass, fell thick on the frozen meadows. The majestic form of Ritter was full in sight, and I pushed rapidly on over rounded rock-bosses and pavements, my iron-shod shoes making a clanking sound, suddenly hushed now and then in rugs of bryanthus, and sedgy lake-margins soft as moss. Here, too, in this so-called "land of desolation," I met cassiope, growing in fringes among the battered rocks. Her blossoms had faded long ago, but they were still clinging with happy memories to the evergreen sprays, and still so beautiful as to thrill every fiber of one's being. Winter and summer, you may hear her voice, the low, sweet melody of her purple bells. No evangel among all the mountain plants speaks Nature's love

more plainly than cassiope. Where she dwells, the redemption of the coldest solitude is complete. The very rocks and glaciers seem to feel her presence, and become imbued with her own fountain sweetness. All things were warming and awakening. Frozen rills began to flow, **the marmots came out of their nests in boulder-piles and climbed sunny rocks to bask**, and the dun-headed sparrows were flitting about seeking their breakfasts. The lakes seen from every ridge-top were brilliantly rippled and spangled, shimmering like the thickets of the low Dwarf Pines. The rocks, too, seemed responsive to the vital heat—rock-crystals and snow-crystalsthrilling alike. I strode on exhilarated, as if never more to feel fatigue, limbs moving of themselves, every sense unfolding like the thawing flowers, to take part in the new day harmony.

6. The Glacier Lakes

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I have never yet met ducks in any of the lakes of this kind, but the ouzel is never wanting where the feeding-streams are perennial. Wild sheep and deer may occasionally be seen on the meadows, and very rarely a bear. One might camp on the rugged shores of these bright fountains for weeks, without meeting any animal larger than **the marmots that burrow beneath glacier boulders along the edges of the meadows**.

7. The Glacier Meadows

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I would fain ask my readers to linger awhile in this fertile wilderness, to trace its history from its earliest glacial beginnings, and learn what we may of its wild inhabitants and visitors. How happy the birds are all summer and some of them all winter; **how the pouched marmots drive tunnels under the snow**, and how fine and brave a life the slandered coyote lives here, and the deer and bears! But, knowing well the difference between reading and seeing, I will only ask attention to some brief sketches of its varying aspects as they are presented throughout the more marked seasons of the year.