1-1-1873

Winter Phenomena of the Yosemite Valley.

John Muir

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March 6, 1872

Dr. Kneeland read the following extracts from letters written by Mr. John Muir, on the winter phenomena of the Yosemite Valley.

On the cold, south, or eclipsed side of valley, average from January 1 to 24, 1872, at Black's Hotel:

Average morning temperature 32° Fahr.
" noon " 40°5
Maximum morning " 36°
" noon " 52°
Minimum morning " 22°
" noon " 32°

Mild and delightful weather, wholly unlike the stormy December, with a little rain and snow, but mostly sunshine.

From Jan. 25 to Feb. 14, 1872

Average sunrise temperature at Black's 28°82 Fahr.
" noon " 40°67
Maximum morning " 37°
Minimum " 23°
Maximum noon " 49°
Minimum " 34°
Rainfall during period 237 inches ?
Snowfall " 3 "

Three days rainy, 3 cloudy, 2 snowy, 10 bright and clear.

January 24th, a terrible wind storm, coming from the north, the only direction in which a gale can enter this deep valley; bending and swaying the great pines two hundred feet high, usually so unbending, like a field of wheat, and showering their cones about like hailstones. The struggle of the Upper Yosemite fall, considerably swelled by the melting snows, was very beautiful; the wind seemed to surround it with a vast whirlpool, which tore it and scattered it about like folds of white drapery, now and then laying bare the black rocks behind.

In the afternoon, the whole column was suddenly arrested in its descent about midway; it was not blown upward or bent to either side but towered in mid air, widening at the base, and doubtless turned inward toward the rock; it remained in this shape about three minutes, an irregular white cone, eight hundred feet high, stationary at
the bottom, as if at the base the laws of gravitation had been suddenly suspended; then all at once it resumed its usual appearance. The force of the wind, and the natural inward air current behind the fall, were so strong as to bend the whole volume of water and curl it backward and inward, giving to the eye the appearance above described. Grand as are the Yosemite waterfalls, the Yosemite air-falls and cascades, masters even of the waters, are still more grand and wonderful.

This great storm produced no serious damage, prostrating only about a score of trees, breaking off many branches, and scattering the pine tassels and cedar plumes far and wide, and by this natural pruning exercising a beneficial influence upon the forests.

Erroneous views prevail as to the severity of the winter climate in this valley. On February 14, 1872, frogs croaked at night in the meadow shallows; upon the warm slopes of the north wall young grasses were an inch high, the sterile aments of the alders were ripe, the cedars were sowing their pollen, the early willows pushing out their catkins, azalea buds opening, flies and moths sporting in the sunshine, and ants busy about their spring work. The contrast between the north and south sides of the valley is remarkable; while on the north and sunny side it was spring, on the south side there were twelve inches of snow and midwinter — the two seasons separated only by half a mile of valley.

The latter part of January there was a magnificent ice cone two hundred feet high at the base of the upper Yosemite fall. This cone was about six hundred feet in diameter at the base, truncated, with the side next the wall deeply flattened; into its tolerably regular mouth, as into the crater of a volcano, poured whole columns of water which escaped by several irregular openings at the base. The rock be-
hind the fall is dark-colored, but on both sides it is covered during frosty nights by frozen spray to a depth of from two inches to several feet; the width of this silvery edging of ice varies with the height, being greatest at the bottom and tapering to the top, like the fall to which it belongs. This grand ice creation, two hundred feet wide at the bottom, developed in a night, dies in a day; a few minutes after the sun falls upon it ragged blocks from a few pounds to several tons in weight begin to fall off, which in their fall echo through the valley, like explosions of powder. The intervals of quiet which separate these explosions are from a few seconds to ten or twelve minutes; it sometimes happens that the sun disintegrates this ice before noon, but usually almost all day is required. The thundering and clattering of this falling ice are the common winter sounds, and the constant accompaniments of pleasant days. The ice cone is thus seen to be simply an accumulation of spray ice, solidified by pressure; it frequently attains a height of four or five hundred feet.

Tourists in California never see, and even the residents know nothing of, the magnificent vegetation of the great central plain of California; it is almost always remembered as a scorched and dust-clouded waste, treeless and dreary as the deserts along the Pacific Railroad. The foot-hills are smooth and flowing, and come down to the bottom levels in beautiful curves; their flowers do not occur singly or scattered about in the grass, but close together in companies, acres and hill-sides in extent, with their white, yellow and purple colors separate, yet harmoniously blending, and their fragrance is exquisite. Throughout the passes abound dogwood and alders, violets and ferns of great beauty. After passing the summit of the hills you come to the magnificent flower bed of the California plains, four hundred miles long and thirty miles wide, a great leven ocean of flowers bounded by the
snow-capped Sierras, watered by the San Joaquin and Sacramento Rivers. The richness of this flower garden is almost beyond belief judged by ordinary standards, or even by that of Florida, the land of flowers; for every flower inhabiting Florida, on equal areas more than a hundred grow here. The flowers are not in the grasses; as on the prairies of Illinois, but the grasses are among the flowers. One actually wades in flowers, hundreds touching the feet at every step. But all this beauty is fast fading before the plough and the cattle and herds of civilization.

February and March are the spring time of the plain, April the summer and May the autumn. Spring opens early, prepared by the rains which begin in December; between May and December rains are very rare, and this is the winter of the plain, a winter of heat and drought. By the middle of May the flowers here are dead, and the leaves dry and parched; not slowly perishing, but suddenly dying before they can fade, standing erect and undecayed, with their beautiful urn-like seed vessels.

As you ascend from the sunny winter of the plain, you find another summer in the foothills of the Sierra; higher up another spring, and on the edge of the valley a snowy winter; descending into the Yosemite Valley, you find another spring, and then glorious summer along the banks of the Merced. Thus, in the space of a week, you pass through all the seasons in this remarkable region.