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Letter from John Muir to [Asa] Gray 1878 Jan 13

John Muir

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ROYAL BOTANIC GARDENS KEW

1419 Taylor St
San Francisco
Jan 13th, '78

My Dear Prof. Gray;

I had intended writing you concerning the forests we passed through after parting, but the exploration of the Middle fork canon of Kings River prevented me; we traveled through more than 150 miles of Yellow pine, & though I had already made up my mind concerning its varieties, our Shasta discussions provoked fresh interest, & I accordingly reviewed the whole question. In many places the most widely varied forms were found growing together, & I examined several hundred of them with the utmost care. Nothing within the range of these observations point to the Jeffrey form as a distinct species. On the contrary my former views regarding it, of which you have already heard enough or more than enough, are corroborated.

Nowhere within the limits of Cal' are the forests of the Yellow pine so extensive & exclusive as on the headwaters of Kitt River. They cover the Mountains & all the lower slopes bordering the wide open valleys that abound here, pressing forward in imposing ranks, seemingly the hardiest & most firmly established of all the California conifers.

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Here the variety - Jeffreyii reaches its greatest distance from the Sierra form of ponderosa, & at the foot of the mountains along the edges of sage plains & volcanic tablelands the two are frequently found together.

I find difficulty in determining the trend of the Darwin spade in this species - in discriminating between head & tail. ~~Whether~~ Which is older? Jeffreyii or ponderosa. That they are forms of one species I have no doubt - but which is the variety? How long Jeffreyii has been established upon these volcanic tablelands I cannot tell, but the ground they now occupy was certainly bare & warm while yet those portions of the mountains now occupied by ponderosa were covered with ice. It therefore occurs to me that what I have been regarding as the outgoing variety, may really be the more ancient form of the species. —

The foliage of Jeff. is grayer, & longer; & the branches are thicker, & much less divided, & more upturned at the tips.

I gather cones 6½ inches long, 4½ dia, rounded in outline, dark purple. Needles of the same trees 9 inches long, average about 8. The needles of ponderosa about 5 inches.

The most easterly limit of the species far as I have learned is the Wasatch mountains. I noticed a few in a canon 15 or 20 miles northeast of Beaver Utah.

Williamson Spruce is abundant around the base of Lassens Butte. What have you determined concerning old flexilis?

There is a manzanita to the NE of Shasta & in towards Lassens Butte that bears a purple berry nearly the size of a fine New Jersey Porcupine valley on Mill Fork R. &c. Has got fine leaves with the Pine. Bidwell. Write to Dr Asa Gray. Plantin near to Miss Gray. Can consider Dr Dr Porter Munro.