



John Muir Correspondence (PDFs)

1897-10-16

Letter from John Muir to [Charles Sprague] Sargent, 1897 Oct 16.

John Muir

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Martinez, Oct. 16, 1897.

My dear Sargent:

I know very well what you have suffered on account of the deadly danger your daughter was in, for I have two daughters and years ago they were near to death. I see that poor, good, able, and amiable Stiles is dead. This death, disease, and pain business of our nature is horrible amid the joy and harmony of our blessed world, and we can only hope and trust that there is a still better world beyond this.

With this I return good Abbot's letters. I think his estimate of Pinchot is just, I'm sorry to say. I thank you for letting me see them. Remember me to him when next you write. Making his acquaintance I always regard as the best gain of that tree year.

The venerable three H. fellow who calls you Charlie must be very happy among his trees and flowers though so near fussy smoky Boston. My wife tells me that he must be the H.H. Hunnewell who has done so much for landscape gardening. I hope to see him some day. I think by a stiff prodding letter I received a day or two ago that you must have been setting Atlantic Page on me. He wants me to write an Alaska book. I suppose I'll have to try it some day and may as well begin this winter. But book making to sturdy You and Page is an easy matter; to me it is precious hard. However, I'll try. In the meantime I am writing a couple of articles on the parks and reserves.

Looking carefully over my old notes of 1879 and '80 I learn that I found Paton Hemlock in the Chilkat Pass at a height of 3000 feet above the sea and saw what I took to be the same tree nearly a thousand feet higher. This is the northmost point at which I saw it, about Lat. 60. I also saw it in abundance on the east side of the Stickeen Canon about 50 miles from the sea at a height of 3000 feet. I also found *Abies subalpina* and *Picea alba* on the headwaters of the Stickeen and Mackenzie rivers, but as I did not know these trees at the time I first saw them I will copy out a few of the original notes and let you judge for yourself.

"On the inland side of the general Coast Range (on the Stickeen) a marked change of climate and consequently of forests occurs. The woods are younger and composed of smaller trees -- a foot to 18 inches diameter and average height of about 70 feet. -----Here the woods are dry at times and whole mountainsides are burned and covered with dead gray masts. The cottonwoods are small and the birch with a few pines, -- contorta - mingle freely with the coast hemlock and Menzies spruce. The birch is best on shady hillsides and is very effective, giving striking character to the forest, their rounded, free, leafy, wind-obeying heads of pale green mingling with the narrow coast hemlock and spruce. The Tamarac pine, or Black pine as contorta is called here, reserves its seeds for several years, and grows well on sunny mountains, often alone, making yellow-green growths to a height of about 2000 feet, complying with the demands of glacial sculpture in curves and belts. It is here slender and arrowy, about 60 feet high, its lower branches often killed but with fine tops.

"There is another spruce here, more slender and graceful than Menzies, drooping at top like Paton, leaves shorter, not prickly-pointed, from 3/8 to 5/8 inches long, the branchlets also slender -- on flood bottoms some 125 feet high near Glenora 140 miles from tidewater and 750 feet above it. Comes in dense clusters covering the top of the tree, yellow and brown in color, not purple, some nearly green, slender ovate long-pointed 2 1/2 to 3 inches long, 5/8 to 7/8 diameter -- a very graceful beautiful tree." (*Picea alba*)?

"In walking from Glenora (140 miles from tide water) to Telegraph Creek (155 miles from tidewater) the trail follows the Stickeen River benches, which are planted with contorta, poplar, and birch and a few piceas and spruces (*P. alba*, and *A. subalpina*). Contorta is the principal tree, slender, six to eight inches diameter. (One hundred miles farther inland) The timber in some places all willow in the low grounds, much exclusively poplar with a few pines (contorta) and birches, and a few spruces along low grounds 50 ft. high -- no tree seen today over 50 ft. high. Thousand acre patches burned -- some green trees burned off at the roots which are on top of the frozen ground and easily killed in dry weather. Had a good view from a high point on the trail of a mountain spur about 6000 ft. high which was timbered to a height of 5000 ft."

"Set out for the summit of a peak 7000 feet high back of Glenora, 140 miles from tide water. First there is a flat terrace about 200 feet above the Stickeen and nearly a thousand feet above the sea. It is about a mile wide and stretches back to the slopes of Glenora Peak. It is covered with birch, spruce (*Picea alba* and *Menziesii*) and fir (subalpina) and poplar growing close and tall as compared with the girth of the trees. Large areas are burned and the ground is strewn with blackened poles. From this terrace the mountain rises in steep slopes. The trees are chiefly spruce and a species of fir (subalpina). The firs growing highest -- even dwarfing at a height of about 5000 feet into lowly chaparral. This dwarfing seems to be due as much to heavy snow as to altitude, for at the same elevation on ridges where the snow can never be deep we find both the dwarfed and erect forms close together. This fir forms the most beautiful chaparral I ever saw. The flat thickly foliated plumes, broad and fan-shaped being

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imbricated over each other by the pressure of the snow so that the high slopes seem to be neatly and handsomely thatched. In this form it is seldom more than 3 or 4 feet high. Yet it bears fertile cones and seems thrifty and happy as if everything was to its mind. In this dwarfed form it reaches a height of 5500 feet. At a height of 4000 feet few of the erect trees are more than 50 ft. high, and one foot in dia. at the ground."

"The pine and spruce of the region lying between the head of Dease Lake and Telegraph Creek in great part give place to a handsome fir around the lake, and upward to the north and on the mountains. The tallest about a hundred feet, one foot diameter at ground, feathered with short branches from top to bottom. The cones are 3 inches long, one in diameter, dark purple, bracts short, dark colored, wings of seeds very dark, leaves 5/8 to 7/8 inch long, falcate, blunt, excepting those of leading shoot which are quite sharp. Mostly pale yellow-green. The mountainside on the west side of the lake is forested with this tree -- leaves all around the branches."

This, I guess, is enough. Goodbye. Remember me to good lively boyish Cicuta Canby.

Ever yours,

JOHN MUIR

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