

A naturalist in the Rockies

ALEX TEWNION

Our introduction to Rocky Mountain wildlife came unexpectedly quickly. Twenty-four hours after landing in Canada, and approaching Jasper National Park on Highway 16 in my brother John's car, we slowed at sight of what appeared to be a traffic jam just outside the park gate. No jam; an accident maybe, for now we saw people jumping out of cars and running excitedly to one side of the road. I was still peering for the crashed car when John, accustomed to such scenes, remarked 'Rocky Mountain sheep. Will I stop?' 'Yes. Quick!' And hurriedly gathering my cameras I joined the roadside throng.

A small flock of ewes with a few lambs, the sheep (also known as bighorn sheep) were not particularly photogenic specimens. Tufts of pale brown hair remaining from the spring coat gave the rich brown autumn pelage a patchy look. What was interesting was that the sheep were below 4,000 feet at this date (30 July) when normally they summer in subalpine and alpine regions at 6,000 feet or higher, though I learned later that both the mountain sheep and mountain goats often come well below timberline in summer to visit their ancient saltlicks. Another point was that the sheep paid little attention to the happy camera-clickers all around. They showed no fear, but when pressed too closely by some over-eager youngsters slowly crossed the road in single file, causing a real traffic jam this time, and then fell to grazing the lush vegetation on the far side.

I took a few photographs in case no later chance came along – the photographer/naturalist has to be an opportunist and I long ago overcame inhibitions about joining the tourist throng if opportunity knocks. However, two weeks later when we passed this way again, en route for Banff and Yoho National Parks farther south, even John did not disdain stopping and getting out his camera when I spotted a couple of bighorn rams having a friendly spar on a roadside crag, at well over 6,000 feet up the Sunwapta Valley on Highway 93.

Readers will know that the Rocky Mountain National Parks are famous for all kinds of mountain sports, but I think I should mention that they are also very strictly maintained as wildlife sanctuaries. The only shooting permitted is done by the park rangers and the only animals shot apart from very sick or injured ones are those individuals that make a nuisance of themselves to the extent of being dangerous. The chief offender is the black bear. It has a habit of frequenting picnic

spots and campsites and rummaging in the garbage bins for scraps, and on occasion may damage or destroy tents to get at food. When this happens the culprit is trapped, marked, and transported 40 or 50 miles to the far side of the mountains before release. If it returns to its old haunts and commits a similar crime, a marked animal is shot. This is the only way to prevent serious accidents, yet people are occasionally badly injured in nasty incidents. For their own safety, therefore, park visitors are advised not to feed, touch, or molest wild animals in any way. Many visitors do in fact feed some of the smaller mammals and birds, especially ground and tree squirrels and Clarke's nutcracker and magpies, but these activities give visitors pleasure, do not harm the animals, and are accepted by the park authorities.

Visitors are chary of feeding or stroking bighorn sheep, though; the animals are parasitised by ticks which can all too easily transmit virus diseases from sheep to man. Enjoying complete protection, however, the sheep have acquired a measure of tameness in place of their proverbial caution. Perhaps no bad thing; sight of a small group by the roadside makes the day for many a park visitor.

After the sheep overture, we cruised on into the township of Jasper, an extremely well organised tourist centre. Here John ordered groceries and got some beer and other refreshments for friends up in the camp we were heading for. This was the annual two-weeks summer camp of the Alpine Club of Canada (A.C.C.) of which John was the hon. camp manager. Doreen and I had arrived in Canada just in time to spend the second week at the camp as John's guests, a trip made possible for Doreen by the fact that John's wife Bunny had most unselfishly stayed behind in Edmonton to look after our two children, Lesley and Hamish, in addition to her own three. On, then, to the park rangers' hand-operated cable car across the swift-flowing glacial waters of the Athabasca River, here 100 yards broad. Once across we left our heavy gear under a tarpaulin at the horse-packers' dump, to be brought up next day by the pack-train; and carrying only sleeping bags and a change of clothing we set off on foot along the final five miles of dusty trails to the A.C.C. camp in Fryatt Valley. Here John searched vainly in the gathering dusk for the tent assigned to Doreen and me, finally putting us into an empty tent in the single ladies' quarters. This raised a few eyebrows when I stepped out in the morning.

Roughly six miles long, Fryatt Valley is walled by the steep rubbly slopes and towering cliffs of a number of glaciated 10,000 foot peaks, built chiefly of limestones and sandstones, the main rock formations in the Rockies. Mt. Fryatt, the highest at 11,026 feet, stands some two

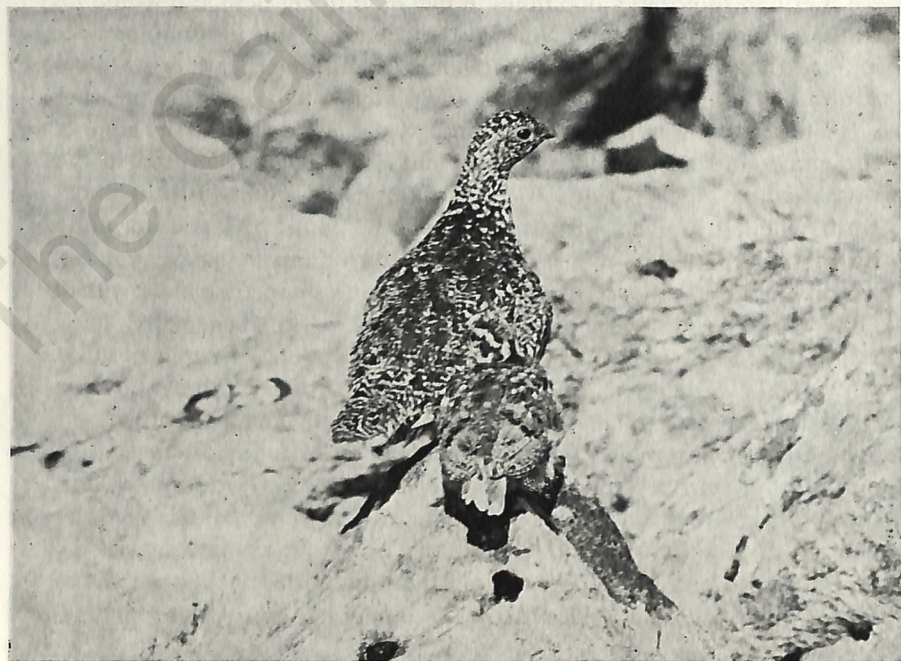


Mt Fryatt, highest of the Fryatt Valley peaks

[photo by Alex. Teunion



A young bighorn ram in the pink of condition



Female white-tailed ptarmigan and chick

[photos by Alex. Tewnton

miles back from the valley. A 400 yards broad expanse of morainic boulders floors the valley which is drained by Fryatt Creek (a creek is a tributary of a main river; Fryatt is roughly the size of the River Dee at Corrou), while thick coniferous forest covers the slopes to about 6,500 feet. The A.C.C. camp was sited by a clear stream at 5,300 feet at the junction of valley and forest. Arranged on somewhat military lines but providing the facilities without any formality – having, for example, a very capable and pretty kitchen and serving staff who daily provided over 100 climbers with two very large cooked meals inside the capacious mess-tent – it catered for all standards of mountaineer. Before we came, beginners had been introduced to snow and ice-techniques on a nearby glacier of suitable steepness. The most experienced A.C.C. members led parties of less experienced and beginners up different peaks most days, while two professional guides from the park staff were present and also led when required. Apart from a few minor accidents, arrangements went like clockwork. One party of six was benighted on a 9,000 feet col and huddled till dawn in an expanding bivouac/rucksack made for three – but they were happy, the guide whose sac it was had just led them up a new route on a 10,000-footer. A.C.C. members certainly enjoy their annual camp; several travel the length or width of Canada or the States to attend, and one couple we met had motored 5,000 miles in five days to get here and would do the same returning home. Nor did they consider this unusual.

At the camp we enjoyed long hours of sunshine each day and soon could identify the commoner birds and plants. A pair of hermit thrushes were feeding young in a nest in some avalanche debris at the edge of the camp and used to fly past our tent – our second, located in the married quarters this time. A cowbird appeared along with the pack-train when it arrived with supplies but we found the packers more interesting than this, to us, new bird. Apart from being weaponless, from their dress and speech they could have stepped straight out of 'The Virginian'. The boss, a tremendous personality called Glen Kilgour, was a horse-rancher and owned the ponies; he told me that without the protection of tough leather chaps their clothes would be ripped to shreds in a single day's riding through the forest scrub.

Another personality we met was Mrs Phil Munday, the naturalist and author and a Hon. President of the A.C.C. Formerly a keen mountaineer and back-packer, she is now sorely handicapped by arthritis, but led a party up through the forest to see a specimen of the rare Calypso orchid or fairyslippers, the only species (*Calypso bulbosa*) of this genus in the Rockies. After the others had gone, she remained

behind to chat while I photographed the Calypso and later when we walked slowly down through the trees she pointed out and named for me a number of plants which I did not know. A wonderful lady – old in years and body but still young in heart – she had ridden into camp on a pony, and she rode out at the end having relished every minute of her stay.

The dense coniferous forest was interrupted at intervals by avalanche tracks which reached down to the valley bed. These tracks as well as the forest floor were absolutely carpeted with a wealth of wildflowers, showing that in these high valleys grazing pressure from herbivores is slight. I was delighted to see several species which are rare in our Scottish pinewoods growing in profusion here on the slopes and hollows. *Linnaea borealis*, the twinflower, was one; another was *Moneses uniflora*, the single-flowered wintergreen, in Canada called woodnymph or single delight; while a third was the one-sided wintergreen *Pyrola secunda*. Many other plants were identifiable to genus at a glance even though the same species do not grow in Britain, a few examples being bunchberry which is a *Cornus* similar to our dwarf cornel, the pink wintergreen – a *Pyrola*, and yellow columbine *Aquilegia flavescens*. Completely unfamiliar species included the mountain death-camas *Zigadenus elegans*, Labrador tea *Ledum groenlandicum*, and Indian paint-brushes of genus *Castilleja*. The list of flowering plants is long compared with a list from coniferous forest in Britain and I would willingly have spent several days on the forest slopes just studying and photographing plants, but by this time I had got so badly bitten by mosquitoes and large black wood ants while lying on the ground taking pictures at plant height that my body at any rate required a change. The cool breezes of the subalpine and alpine meadows promised relief for the itching bumps on my face and legs, so after two days in the forest we ventured farther afield.

A dipper called from the frothing waters of Fryatt Creek as we followed a rough track across the stonefield to Lake Fryatt – its waters are the beautiful turquoise so typical of the Rocky Mountain glacial lakes. Though superficially barren, the stonefield provided a habitat for numerous small mats of yellow *Dryas* growing wherever the limestone had crumbled to form pockets of soil, while yellow mountain saxifrage beautified the meltwater streams trickling down to the creek. A spotted sandpiper calling anxiously from a willow bush betrayed by its behaviour that it had chicks hiding somewhere on the *Dryas*-carpeted flats at the lake mouth, but we had insufficient time for an adequate search. Following a path through spruce and fir at the lake

edge, we at length crossed a clearing and then ascended a steep head-wall to the A.C.C. High Camp. This consisted of a snug log cabin built in 1970 by the A.C.C. (the building materials having been lifted in by helicopter), and half a dozen tents. Only 50 yards away, three harlequin ducks swam and dived in a large 'sink', a rock-basin into which the creek water flowed at one end and disappeared into an underground cavern at the other. Up-creek from the camp we saw our first Columbian ground squirrel in a patch of 9-inch-tall willow shrub. As this burrowing rodent is a rather unwary species, easily caught by predators such as fox and golden eagle, I had little difficulty in stalking and photographing it. By a small glacial lake at the head of Fryatt Valley I succeeded in photographing a golden-mantled ground squirrel, an inquisitive, colourful little rodent less than half the size of the Columbian ground squirrel. The feat required no little agility as the squirrel scurried and leapt amongst the gigantic boulders at the lake margin, for no sooner had I focused the camera than the squirrel had reached another boulder 20 feet farther off – or 10 feet closer! These ground squirrels of the mountains are hibernators, the Columbian ground squirrels especially being famed for spending about seven months sleeping and then stuffing themselves with the lush vegetation during the short four months of spring-summer-autumn. In the alpine zone of the Rockies, these three seasons are telescoped into one: old snow still lay in patches on some of the meadows in the first week of August, and new snow dusted the peaks down to 9,000 feet just a week later.

The wildflowers of the high subalpine and alpine meadows were a wonder and delight to us, for long accustomed to the effects of over-grazing by deer and sheep in the Scottish Highlands. The summer of 1972 produced the finest blossoming of mountain flowers I have ever seen on Ben Lawers, but even so it did not begin to compare with the breathtaking splendour of the Rockies' alpine flora. Listing a long series of plants is pointless but I should like to mention the heaths that grow up to and above the timberline – white mountain heather *Cassiope tetragona*, yellow mountain heather *Phyllodoce glanduliflora* and pink mountain heather *P. empetriflora*; and the resplendent red and yellow Indian paint-brushes below the towering precipices of Mt. Belanger – I scarcely believed my eyes when a male rufous humming-bird flitted like a colourful overgrown bee from one flower to another to hover and sip nectar.

To improve our acquaintance with the alpine wildlife, we spent a night at the High Camp, emerging at dawn from the funnel entrance

of a mountain tent to find the ground hoared with frost. But up on the meadows after sunrise the air was warm, and we spent several hours with the ecological equivalents of our rock ptarmigan, snow bunting and meadow pipit, here represented by the white-tailed ptarmigan, gray-crowned rosy finch and American water pipit. Some of our Scottish ptarmigan often appear ridiculously tame, especially hens on the nest and with young chicks, but I am convinced that at least some of the white-tailed ptarmigan hens we saw had never seen a human being before, nor had their ancestors. They showed no fear or nervousness when we walked slowly about but fed right up to our feet, industriously pecking at flowers and seeds. At one point when I was about 10 feet from a hen with four chicks, stalking them to get a picture, the bird stretched up its neck and uttered a low warning. The chicks immediately crouched where they were and remained frozen for about two minutes, during which the hen cocked her head and kept a watchful eye on something I could not see as I was in a hollow. Then she relaxed, called the all-clear, and the chicks unfroze and began feeding again. I asked Doreen, who had been behind and above me, what had frightened the bird. She explained that a Columbian ground squirrel had popped up at the mouth of its burrow about 30 feet beyond the ptarmigan. The fact that the bird should ignore me, a bulky giant when carrying my camera kit but obviously living and mobile, and yet be afraid of the ground squirrel which was roughly its own size, showed clearly that the bird did not identify man as a potential enemy. The rosy finches also showed no fear, and fed about our feet, but the water pipits were wary birds and did not permit close approach.

Spending a final weekend at the main camp, in between helping John and the staff to dismantle tents, burn rubbish, and pack stores, I spent some amusing hours trying to tame a golden-mantled ground squirrel whose home was a hole in the stonefield at the camp edge. By the time we left, he allowed me to approach to about 8 feet. Next day we paid a brief visit to Mt. Edith Cavell chalet where, to my mortification, golden-mantled ground squirrels and Clarke's nut-crackers were so tame that they took food from the hand, and any trigger-happy tourist could snap them. As I have already betrayed my secrets when writing about the sheep, you should not feel surprised when I mention that I, too, bought a bag of nuts and persuaded Doreen and a squirrel to pose!

Ten days later, two carloads of Tewnions (John's family and mine) left Edmonton en route for Banff via Jasper. Next day, near Pochontas, in the early morning we saw a coyote slinking through the knee-deep

grass at the forest edge, and a couple of hours later at a picnic site in Sunwapta Valley we had the inevitable bear encounter. On the tourist trail now, we stopped at Lake Louise and in torrid heat staggered up a dusty trail to the Plain of Six Glaciers, witnessing a great avalanche thundering off Mt. Victoria on one hand, and on the other picnickers throwing scraps to tame Columbian ground squirrels. Then on again, with a constant succession of giant peaks looming up ahead, drawing alongside, receding astern, till at last we drew in to the A.C.C. cabins on a hillside above the tourist township of Banff. The A.C.C. cabins here were run somewhat on youth hostel lines, with a resident warden in charge. The main building resembled a Highland shooting lodge, but built of logs, with a communal kitchen and dining-room, warden's quarters and office, a huge sitting room downstairs and another huge room housing the Club Library upstairs. An adjacent large wooden building provided sleeping accommodation in double rooms, toilet facilities and showers, while a row of four-bunk cabins was available for families. Cooking and cleaning arrangements were much as at Muir Cottage, and members and guests could come and go with little restriction as to time. (I write in the past tense here, as these buildings have now been dismantled and replaced by new buildings at Camrose, outside the park boundary.) The fee was \$3.00 for adult guests and half of that for juniors. After seeing us settled in, John and Bunny with their children returned to Edmonton, leaving us Bunny's car so that we could move around freely.

With the weather remaining fine we took things easily. A couple of miles from Banff lie the three Vermilion Lakes, a natural paradise where we spent some time bird-watching. An osprey flew across one lake and settled on top of a tall tree, no doubt keeping watch on the human fishers in boats and canoes on the lake. On the muddy shore fed a pectoral sandpiper and a small flock of lesser yellowlegs. More homely were a flock of starlings in the trees, mallard on the lakes, and a family of geese in the river, while a rare spectacle was provided by a family of red-necked grebes on one of the lakes. This species was recorded breeding for the first time in Banff National Park in 1965. Nearby were several beaver ponds with dams and lodges. Almost submerged, a beaver rippled across one pond and with a quick flip of its broad flat tail dived to the underwater entrance of its lodge.

Above Banff towers Sulphur Mountain, which we climbed the easy way by gondola car. Up on the ridge at 7,000 feet the first tints of autumn were already discernible in the reddening leaves on some

of the deciduous trees and shrubs. While Doreen, Lesley and Hamish scrambled along the three miles of rocky ridge to the summit, I stalked and photographed a least chipmunk, a fascinating little tree-climbing rodent; and afterwards, on the sloping limestone ledges, I stalked a small flock of bighorn sheep and obtained a few of the spectacular pictures that one dreams about but seldom gets oneself.

The climax of our trip was a three-day visit to Lake O'Hara in Yoho National Park, B.C. This high-lying lake with its surrounding 10,000 foot and 11,000 foot peaks is one of the most picturesque spots in the Rockies. A gravelled fire-road runs through the forest to Lake O'Hara from Wapta on Highway 1; private motorists cannot use it, but a bus from Lake Louise in Banff Park makes the return journey two or three times daily. Laden with food and the usual equipment, we caught the bus and in no time were staggering under our heavy loads up to the A.C.C. cabin on the Alpine Meadow. (Yes; another cabin! The Canadian Rockies are dotted along their long length with A.C.C. huts in the most useful and often magnificent locations.) From this excellent base, we covered all the walks in the immediate vicinity – the Odaray Plateau, Lake McArthur, Opabin Lakes, Morning Glory Lakes, Wiwaxy alpine trail – and marvelled anew at the astonishing tameness of some of the animals. Some of those memories will take long to fade. Particularly vivid in mind is the family of hoary or whistling marmots on the stonefield bounding a small glacial lake below the precipices of Mt. Odaray; these normally very timid animals were completely unafraid of us, and again I formed the impression of creatures that had never before seen a human being and consequently did not associate us with danger. We saw and heard many of these wild whistlers on the screefields and rubbly slopes by Lake McArthur and the Opabin Lakes. Those strange hay-making lagomorphs the pikas were common here too, and I spent several hours among the rocks watching them. But the memory I cherish most is of a white-tailed ptarmigan hen with a brood at Lake McArthur – she led them straight to where I stood at the water's edge, passed me, and then returned to sip the water at my very feet. No Scottish ptarmigan has ever done that!

