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This is one of a series of bulletins issued regularly for the information of those interested in the Natural History and History of Yellowstone National Park and the unmatched educational opportunities offered by this region. PUBLICATIONS USING THESE NOTES WILL PLEASE GIVE CREDIT TO "YELLOWSTONE NATURE NOTES" AND TO THE AUTHOR.

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WINTER PATROL
by
Assistant Chief Ranger Hugh Peyton

Four rangers awoke and one by one crawled from the warmth of their bunks to gaze into the half light of the early morning. Through the windows of the Lake Ranger Station the fine frost filled the air on a slight breeze that made the Lake Yellowstone a weird blur of arctic grey festooned with wisps of frost.

There was little conversation as the breakfast was made and the pack sacks were carefully examined. This was to be the parting of the ways. The four of us had spent four days on the trail from Mammoth together and now Rangers Condon and Ebert were to separate from us and cross the Lake and to Thorofare. Ranger Yetter and myself were to move toward the Pelican Country.

Our skis swished through the frost crystals

with a whispering rythm and our two parties drew farther and farther apart. From the north end of the lake we could get an occasional glimpse of Condon and Ebert as they moved like wraiths in the frost-filled air. Our own trail followed the road to Pelican Creek and to Squaw Lake. A large moose moved across the road in front of us plowing four feet of soft snow with ease. At Squaw Lake a buffalo bull eyed us with suspecion and plowed desperately to put himself as far from us as possible. Breaking north from the road and eastward we were seen in the lower end of the Pelican Meadows. Here the wind filled the air with snow and the surface of the valley appeared flat. But in the weird light it was difficult to keep orientated. What appeared to be a flat surface in front of us would often suddenly break away and let us down into a draw or depression that required heart-breaking effort and some profanity to get out of.

After what seemed ages of falling down slopes and climbing to new ridges we came to signs of pawing in the snow. On a slope away from the wind were lying a herd of buffalo. They appeared to be sleeping and were nearly covered with the drifting snow. Upon scenting us the whole area seemed to arise as if the earth was pushed up suddenly by some subterranean force and there was a swishing sound as the buffalo moved through the sugar-like snow. We watched them until they faded into the whirling snow, then plodded onward.

The long-fingered shadows of night were reaching into each canyon and depression as we wearily pushed our skis up to the Pelican Creek Snowshoe Cabin. It is by comparison that luxury and wealth is measured in this world. In that world of whirling snow we could not have traded that snug cabin set in a frame of trees with a tiny square of orange light blinking from its windows for the deck of a palatial yacht or the wealth of a palace. Filled to satisfaction with Jerry's culinary efforts we crawled into our bunks to drift in the slumber that comes from long trails.

The next day was clear and bright. Pelican meadows stretched away like a lake of white, fringed by timber. Overhead was an ocean of blue, and beneath it, like two spots of alien life, we moved again across the snow. The day being clear, the "buffs" were abroad in great numbers. Near the section where Pelican Creek comes into the meadows from the higher country we could see much activity in the herd. Upon drawing closer we could see these huge animals at play. Several psuedo fights were taking place and there was much running about. Great geysers of frost were being

exhaled from their nostrils and so absorbed were they in their play that we were within a few yards of thorn before they discovered us and broke into a surging wave of black toward the opposite side of the valley.

Ascending the Creek a short distance we found the main herd of the valley. Against the bank of the sheltered area they appeared to be dozing in the warmth of the sunlight afforded by the reflection. Again there was a thunderous wave of moving buffalo toward the mouth of the canyon. One hundred and eight of these majestic animals filed down the canyon and out onto the open flats.

From there our trail wound up the narrowing valley to the Mud Pots where vents of steam arose and floated away in the cold thin air. On the mountain side two hot spots were busily puffing away like a couple of steam engines and adding a touch of life and action to what was an other wise still and silent world. Toiling ever upward we came to a bare spot caused by hot water and a lone cow elk was snowbound in this area. She made a desperate attempt to move away but the snow on the edges was too much for her. Finding it impossible to run she turned back and eyed us apprehensively as we moved slowly by and out of sight around a bend in the creek.

As we approached the vicinity of the Fern Lake Cabin the air again became filled with flying snow and it was with a feeling of relief that it was finally sighted sitting deep in the snow. Jerry attacked the cellar and ration supply with energy and soon the air was filled with the savory aroma of frying bacon and coffee just coming to the boiling point. Among the first chores attended to after a fire was lit was the filling of the water buckets with snow to be melted for water supply. The creeks being buried deep beneath the snow discouraged us from attempting to get water from that source.

Two nights were spent in this cabin and one day was spent in the vicinity of Fern, Tern, and White Lakes. In the few square feet of open water near the outlets of these lakes a few mallards and Golden Eyes held forth in their long wait for the coming of spring and the breaking up of the ice on the lakes and streams.

On the third day we again placed the cabin in shape to leave and headed back toward Pelican cabin. Again the air was filled with moving snow and we fought our way all day through the whirling blasts to the cabin that we had left three days before. Our next lap in the patrol was over the divide into the head of

Mist Creek and the Lamar River watershed to a cabin on Cold Creek, a distance of 14 miles. It took two hours of steady climbing to reach the top, three miles from the cabin at Pelican. The gauge read 55 inches of snow on top and the fall was very pronounced from that point to the Mist Creek Meadows.

At Cold Creek Cabin a short wave radio was taken from its storage and set up and contact was made with headquarters. After fighting the slopes of the canyon trail for a day and spending the night at Lower Miller Creek Cabin we emerged with a long trek to the mouth of Soda Butte to settle down in the cushions of an automobile and return to headquarters. Another winter patrol completed!



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