

CLASSIC LIVING BOOK

WILD ANIMALS
AT HOME

Ernest Thompson
Seton

COMPLETE AND UNABRIDGED

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by

ERNEST THOMPSON SETON



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Foreword

My travels in search of light on the "Animals at Home" have taken me up and down the Rocky Mountains for nearly thirty years. In the canyons from British Columbia to Mexico, I have lighted my campfire, far beyond the bounds of law and order, at times, and yet I have found no place more rewarding than the Yellowstone Park, the great mountain haven of wild life.

Whenever travellers penetrate into remote regions where human hunters are unknown, they find the wild things half tame, little afraid of man, and inclined to stare curiously from a distance of a few paces. But very soon they learn that man is their most dangerous enemy, and fly from him as soon as he is seen. It takes a long time and much restraint to win back their confidence.

In the early days of the West, when game abounded and when fifty yards was the extreme deadly range of the hunter's weapons, wild creatures were comparatively tame. The advent of the rifle and of the lawless skin hunter soon turned all big game into fugitives of excessive shyness and wariness. One glimpse of a man half a mile off, or a whiff of him on the breeze, was enough to make a Mountain Ram or a Wolf run for miles, though formerly these creatures would have gazed serenely from a point but a hundred yards removed.

The establishment of the Yellowstone Park in 1872 was the beginning of a new era of protection for wild life; and, by slow degrees, a different attitude in these animals toward us. In this

Reservation, and nowhere else at present in the northwest, the wild things are not only abundant, but they have resumed their traditional Garden-of-Eden attitude toward man.

They come out in the daylight, they are harmless, and they are not afraid at one's approach. Truly this is ideal, a paradise for the naturalist and the camera hunter.

The region first won fame for its Canyon, its Cataracts and its Geysers, but I think its animal life has attracted more travellers than even the landscape beauties. I know it was solely the joy of being among the animals that led me to spend all one summer and part of another season in the Wonderland of the West.

My adventures in making these studies among the fourfoots have been very small adventures indeed; the thrillers are few and far between. Any one can go and have the same or better experiences to-day. But I give them as they happened, and if they furnish no ground for hair-lifting emotions, they will at least show what I was after and how I went.

I have aimed to show something of the little aspects of the creatures' lives, which are those that the ordinary traveller will see; I go with him indeed, pointing out my friends as they chance to pass, adding a few comments that should make for a better acquaintance on all sides. And I have offered glimpses, wherever possible, of the wild thing in its home, embodying in these chapters the substance of many lectures given under the same title as this book.

The cover design is by my wife, Grace Gallatin Seton. She was with me in most of the experiences narrated and had a larger share in every part of the work than might be inferred from the mere text.

Ernest Thompson Seton.

I

The Cute Coyote

I

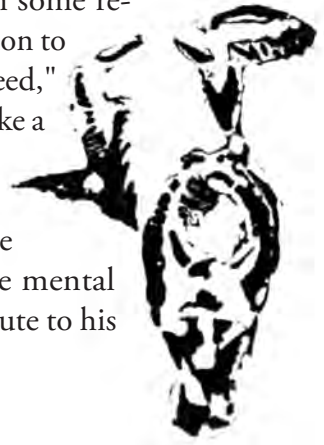
The Cute Coyote

AN EXEMPLARY LITTLE BEAST, MY FRIEND THE COYOTE

If you draw a line around the region that is, or was, known as the Wild West, you will find that you have exactly outlined the kingdom of the Coyote. He is even yet found in every part of it, but, unlike his big brother the Wolf, he never frequented the region known as Eastern America.

This is one of the few wild creatures that you can see from the train. Each time I have come to the Yellowstone Park I have discovered the swift gray form of the Coyote among the Prairie-dog towns along the River flat between Livingstone and Gardiner, and in the Park itself have seen him nearly every day, and heard him every night without exception.

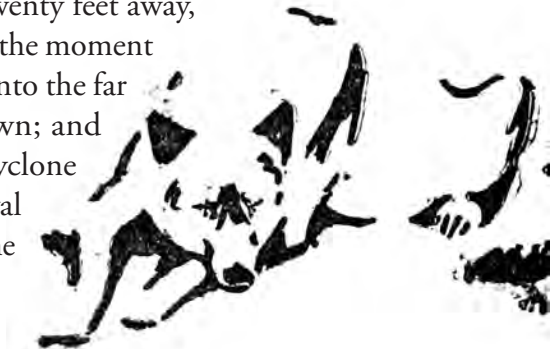
Coyote (pronounced *Ky-o'-tay*, and in some regions *Ky-ute*) is a native Mexican contribution to the language, and is said to mean "halfbreed," possibly suggesting that the Coyote looks like a cross between the Fox and the Wolf. Such an origin would be a very satisfactory clue to his character, for he does seem to unite in himself every possible attribute in the mental make-up of the other two that can contribute to his success in life.



He is one of the few Park animals not now protected, for the excellent reasons, first that he is so well able to protect himself, second he is even already too numerous, third he is so destructive among the creatures that he can master. He is a beast of rare cunning; some of the Indians call him God's dog or Medicine dog. Some make him the embodiment of the Devil, and some going still further, in the light of their larger experience, make the Coyote the Creator himself seeking amusement in disguise among his creatures, just as did the Sultan in the "Arabian Nights."

The naturalist finds the Coyote interesting for other reasons. When you see that sleek gray and yellow form among the mounds of the Prairie-dog, at once creating a zone of blankness and silence by his very presence as he goes, remember that he is hunting for something to eat; also, that there is another, his mate, not far away. For the Coyote is an exemplary and moral little beast who has only one wife; he loves her devotedly, and they fight the life battle together. Not only is there sure to be a mate close by, but that mate, if invisible, is likely to be playing a game, a very clever game as I have seen it played.

Furthermore, remember there is a squealing brood of little Coyotes in the home den up on a hillside a mile or two away. Father and mother must hunt continually and successfully to furnish their daily food. The dog-towns are their game preserves, but how are they to catch a Prairie-dog! Every one knows that though these little yapping Ground-squirrels will sit up and bark at an express train but twenty feet away, they scuttle down out of sight the moment a man, dog or Coyote enters into the far distant precincts of their town; and downstairs they stay in the cyclone cellar until after a long interval of quiet that probably proves the



storm to be past. Then they poke their prominent eyes above the level, and, if all is still, will softly hop out and in due course, resume their feeding.

THE PRAIRIE-DOG OUTWITTED

This is how the clever Coyote utilizes these habits. He and his wife approach the dog-town unseen. One Coyote hides, then the other walks forward openly into the town. There is a great barking of all the Prairie-dogs as they see their enemy approach, but they dive down when he is amongst them. As soon as they are out of sight the second Coyote rushes forward and hides near any promising hole that happens to have some sort of cover close by. Meanwhile, Coyote number one strolls on. The Prairie-dogs that he scared below come up again. At first each puts up the top of his head merely, with his eyes on bumps, much like those of a hippopotamus, prominent and peculiarly suited for this observation work from below, as they are the first things above ground. After a brief inspection, if all be quiet, he comes out an inch more. Now he can look around, the coast is clear, so he sits up on the mound and scans his surroundings.

Yes! Ho! Ho! he sees his enemy, that hated Coyote, strolling away off beyond the possibility of doing harm. His confidence is fully restored as the Coyote gets smaller in the distance and the other Prairie-dogs coming out seem to endorse his decision and give him renewed confidence. After one or two false starts, he sets off to feed.





means go ten or twenty feet from the door of his den, for all the grass

is eaten off near home.

Among the herbage he sits up high to take a final look around, then burying his nose in the fodder, he begins his meal. This is the chance that the waiting, watching, she-Coyote counted on. There is a flash of gray fur from behind that little grease bush; in three hops she is upon him. He takes alarm at the first sound and tries to reach the haven hole, but she snaps him up. With a shake she ends his troubles. He hardly knows the pain of death, then she bounds away on her back track to the home den on the distant hillside. She does not come near it openly and rashly. There is always the possibility of such an approach betraying the family to some strong enemy on watch. She circles around a little, scrutinizes the landscape, studies the tracks and the wind, then comes to the door by more or less devious hidden ways. The sound of a foot outside is enough to make the little ones cover in absolute silence, but mother reassures them with a whining call much like that of a dog mother. They rush out, tumbling over each other in their glee, six or seven in number usually, but sometimes as high as ten or twelve. Eagerly they come, and that fat Prairie-dog lasts perhaps three minutes, at the end of which time nothing is left but the larger bones with a little Coyote busy polishing each of them. Strewn about the door of the den are many other kindred souvenirs, the bones of Ground-squirrels, Chipmunks, Rabbits, Grouse, Sheep, and Fawns, with many kinds of feathers, fur, and hair, to show the great diversity of Coyote diet.



THE COYOTE'S SENSE OF HUMOUR

To understand the Coyote fully one must remember that he is simply a wild dog, getting his living by his wits, and saving his life by the tireless serviceability of his legs; so has developed both these gifts to an admirable pitch of perfection. He is blessed further with a gift of music and a sense of humour.

When I lived at Yancey's, on the Yellowstone, in 1897, I had a good example of the latter, and had it daily for a time. The dog attached to the camp on the inner circle was a conceited, irrepressible little puppy named Chink. He was so full of energy, enthusiasm, and courage that there was no room left in him for dog-sense. But it came after a vast number of humiliating experiences.

A Coyote also had attached himself to the camp, but on the outer circle. At first he came out by night to feed on the garbage pile, but realizing the peace of the Park he became bolder and called occasionally by day. Later he was there every day, and was often seen sitting on a ridge a couple of hundred yards away.

One day he was sitting much nearer and grinning in Coyote fashion, when one of the campers in a spirit of mischief said to the dog, "Chink, you see that Coyote out there grinning at you. Go and chase him out of that."

Burning to distinguish himself, that pup set off at full speed, and every time he struck the ground he let off a war-whoop. Away went the Coyote and it looked like a good race to us, and to the Picket-pin Ground-squirrels that sat up high on their mounds to rejoice in the spectacle of these, their enemies, warring against each other.

The Coyote has a way of slouching along, his tail dangling and tangling with his legs, and his legs loose-jointed, mixing with his tail. He doesn't seem to work hard but oh! how he does cover the prairie! And very soon it was clear that in spite of his

magnificent bounds and whoops of glory, Chink was losing ground. A little later the Coyote obviously had to slack up to keep from running away altogether. It had seemed a good race for a quarter of a mile, but it was nothing to the race which began when the Coyote turned on Chink. Uttering a gurgling growl, a bark, and a couple of screeches, he closed in with all the combined fury of conscious might and right, pitted against unfair unprovoked attack.

And Chink had a rude awakening; his war-whoops gave place to yelps of dire distress, as he wheeled and made for home. But the Coyote could run all around him, and nipped him, here and there, and when he would, and seemed to be cracking a series of good jokes at Chink's expense, nor ever stopped till the ambitious one of boundless indiscretion was hidden under his master's bed.

This seemed very funny at the time, and I am afraid Chink did not get the sympathy he was entitled to, for after all he was merely carrying out orders. But he made up his mind that from that time on, orders or no orders, he would let Coyotes very much alone. They were not so easy as they looked.

The Coyote, however, had discovered a new amusement. From that day he simply "laid" for that little dog, and if he found him a hundred yards or so from camp, would chase and race him back in terror to some shelter. At last things got so bad that if we went for a ride even, and Chink followed us, the Coyote would come along, too, and continue his usual amusement.

At first it was funny, and then it became tedious, and at last it was deeply resented by Chink's master. A man feels for his dog; he wasn't going to stand still and see his dog abused. He began to



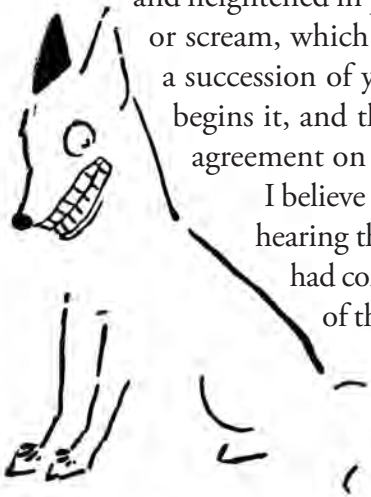


grumble vaguely about "If something didn't happen pretty soon, something else would." Just what he meant I didn't ask, but I know that the Coyote disappeared one day, and never was seen or heard of again. I'm not supposed to know any thing about it, but I have my suspicions, although in those days the Coyote was a protected animal.

HIS DISTINGUISHING GIFT

The scientific name of the Coyote (*Canis latrans*), literally "Barking Dog," is given for the wonderful yapping chorus with which they seldom fail to announce their presence in the evening, as they gather at a safe distance from the campfire. Those not accustomed to the sound are very ready to think that they are surrounded by a great pack of ravening Wolves, and get a sufficiently satisfactory thrill of mingled emotions at the sound. But the guide will reassure you by saying that that great pack of howling Wolves is nothing more than a harmless little Coyote, perhaps two, singing their customary vesper song, demonstrating their wonderful vocal powers. Their usual music begins with a few growling, gurgling yaps which are rapidly increased in volume and heightened in pitch, until they rise into a long squall or scream, which again, as it dies away, breaks up into a succession of yaps and gurgles. Usually one Coyote begins it, and the others join in with something like agreement on the scream.

I believe I never yet camped in the West without hearing this from the near hills when night time had come. Last September I even heard it back of the Mammoth Hot Springs Hotel, and I must say I have learned to love it. It is a wild, thrilling, beautiful song. Our



first camp was at Yancey's last summer and just after we had all turned in, the Coyote chorus began, a couple of hundred yards from the camp. My wife sat up and exclaimed, "Isn't it glorious? now I know we are truly back in the West."

The Park authorities are making great efforts to reduce the number of Coyotes because of their destructiveness to the young game, but an animal that is endowed with extraordinary wits, phenomenal speed, unexcelled hardihood, and marvellous fecundity, is not easily downed. I must confess that if by any means they should succeed in exterminating the Coyote in the West, I should feel that I had lost something of very great value. I never fail to get that joyful thrill when the "Medicine Dogs" sing their "Medicine Song" in the dusk, or the equally weird and thrilling chorus with which they greet the dawn; for they have a large repertoire and a remarkable register. The Coyote is indeed the Patti of the Plains.

THE COYOTE'S SONG¹

I am the Coyote that sings each night at dark;
 It was by gobbling prairie-dogs that I got such a bark.
 At least a thousand prairie-dogs I fattened on, you see,
 And every bark they had in them is reproduced in me.

Refrain:

I can sing to thrill your soul or pierce it like a lance,
 And all I ask of you to do is give me half a chance.
 With a yap—yap—yap for the morning
 And a yoop—yoop—yoop for the night
 And a yow—wow—wow for the rising moon
 And a yah-h-h-h for the campfire light.
 Yap—yoop—yow—yahhh!
 I gathered from the howling winds, the frogs and crickets too,
 And so from each availing fount, my inspiration drew.

1 All rights reserved.

I warbled till the little birds would quit their native bush.
 And squat around me on the ground in reverential hush.

Refrain:

I'm a baritone, soprano, and a bass and tenor, too.
 I can thrill and slur and frill and whirl and shake you through and
 through.
 I'm a Jews' harp—I'm an organ—I'm a fiddle and a flute.
 Every kind of touching sound is found in the coyoot.

Refrain:

I'm a whooping howling wilderness, a sort of Malibrán.
 With Lind, Labache and Melba mixed and all combined in one.
 I'm a grand cathedral organ and a calliope sharp,
 I'm a gushing, trembling nightingale, a vast Æolian harp.

Refrain:

I can raise the dead or paint the town, or pierce you like a lance
 And all I ask of you to do is to give me half a chance.
 Etc., etc., etc.

(Encore verses)

Although I am a miracle, I'm not yet recognized.
 Oh, when the world does waken up how highly I'll be prized.
 Then managers and vocal stars—and emperors effete
 Shall fling their crowns, their money bags, their persons, at my feet.

Refrain:

I'm the voice of all the Wildest West, the Patti of the Plains;
 I'm a wild Wagnerian opera of diabolic strains;
 I'm a roaring, ranting orchestra with lunatics be-crammed;
 I'm a vocalized tornado—I'm the shrieking of the damned.

Refrain:



II

The Prairie-dog and His Kin

II

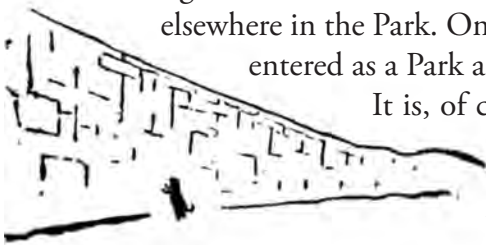
The Prairie-dog and His Kin

MERRY YEK-YEK AND HIS LIFE OF TROUBLES

The common Prairie-dog is typical of the West, more so than the Buffalo is, and its numbers, even now, rival those of the Buffalo in its palmyest days. I never feel that I am truly back on the open range till I hear their call and see the Prairie-dogs once more upon their mounds. As you travel up the Yellowstone Valley from Livingstone to Gardiner you may note in abundance this "dunce of the plains." The "dog-towns" are frequent along the railway, and at each of the many burrows you see from one to six of the inmates. As you come near Gardiner there is a steady rise of the country, and somewhere near the edge of the Park the elevation is such that it imposes one of those mysterious barriers to animal extension which seem to be as impassable as they are invisible. The Prairie-dog range ends near the Park gates. General George S. Anderson tells me, however, that individuals are occasionally found on the flats along the Gardiner River, but always near the gate, and never elsewhere in the Park. On this basis, then, the Prairie-dog is entered as a Park animal.

It is, of course, a kind of Ground-squirrel.

The absurd name "dog" having been given on account of its "bark." This call is a high-pitched "yek-yek-



yek-yeeh," uttered as an alarm cry while the creature sits up on the mound by its den, and every time it "yek" it jerks up its tail. Old timers will tell you that the Prairie-dog's voice is tied to its tail, and prove it by pointing out that one is never raised without the other.

As we have seen, the Coyote looks on the dog-town much as a cow does on a field of turnips or alfalfa—a very proper place, to seek for wholesome, if commonplace, sustenance. But Coyotes are not the only troubles in the life of Yek-yek.

Ancient books and interesting guides will regale the traveller with most acceptable stories about the Prairie-dog, Rattlesnake, and the Burrowing Owl, all living in the same den on a basis of brotherly love and Christian charity; having effected, it would seem, a limited partnership and a most satisfactory division of labour: the Prairie-dog is to dig the hole, the Owl to mount sentry and give warning of all danger, and the Rattler is to be ready to die at his post as defender of the Prairie-dog's young. This is pleasing if true.

There can be no doubt that at times all three live in the same burrow, and in dens that the hard-working rodent first made. But the simple fact is that the Owl and the Snake merely use the holes abandoned (perhaps under pressure) by the Prairie-dog; and if any two of the three underground worthies happen to meet in the same hole, the fittest survives. I suspect further that the young of each kind are fair game and acceptable, dainty diet to each of the other two.





Farmers consider Prairie-dogs a great nuisance; the damage they do to crops is estimated at millions per annum. The best way to get rid of them, practically the only way, is by putting poison down each and every hole in the town, which medieval Italian mode has become the accepted method in the West.

Poor helpless little Yek-yek, he has no friends; his enemies and his list of burdens increase. The prey of everything that preys, he yet seems incapable of any measure of retaliation. The only visible joy in his life is his daily hasty meal of unsucculent grass, gathered between cautious looks around for any new approaching trouble, and broken by so many dodges down the narrow hole that his ears are worn off close to his head. Could any simpler, smaller pleasure than his be discovered? Yet he is fat and merry; undoubtedly he enjoys his every day on earth, and is as unwilling as any of us to end the tale. We can explain him only if we credit him with a philosophic power to discover happiness within in spite of all the cold unfriendly world about him.

THE WHISTLER IN THE ROCKS

When the far-off squirrel ancestor of Yek-yek took to the plains for a range, another of the family selected the rocky hills.

He developed bigger claws for the harder digging, redder colour for the red-orange surroundings, and a far louder and longer cry for signalling across the peaks and canyons, and so



became the bigger, handsomer, more important creature we call the Mountain Whistler, Yellow Marmot or Orange Woodchuck.

In all of the rugged mountain parts of the Yellowstone one may hear his peculiar, shrill whistle, especially in the warm mornings.

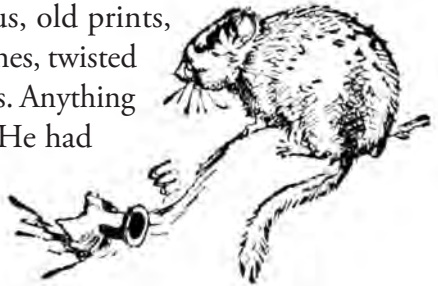
You carefully locate the direction of the note and proceed to climb toward it. You may have an hour's hard work before you sight the orange-breasted Whistler among the tumbled mass of rocks that surround his home, for it is a far-reaching sound, heard half a mile away at times.

Those who know the Groundhog of the East would recognize in the Rock Woodchuck its Western cousin, a little bigger, yellower, and brighter in its colours, living in the rocks and blessed with a whistle that would fill a small boy with envy. Now, lest the critical should object to the combination name of "Rock Woodchuck," it is well to remind them that "Woodchuck" has nothing to do with either "wood" or "chucking," but is our corrupted form of an Indian name "Ot-choeck," which is sometimes written also "We-jack."

In the ridge of broken rocks just back of Yancey's is a colony of the Whistlers; and there as I sat sketching one day, with my camera at hand, one poked his head up near me and gave me the pose that is seen in the photograph.

THE PACK-RAT AND HIS MUSEUM

Among my school fellows was a boy named Waddy who had a mania for collecting odds, ends, curios, bits of brass or china, shiny things, pebbles, fungus, old prints, bones, business cards, carved peach stones, twisted roots, distorted marbles, or freak buttons. Anything odd or glittering was his especial joy. He had no theory about these things. He did



not do anything in particular with them. He found gratification in spreading them out to gloat over, but I think his chief joy was in the collecting. And when some comrade was found possessed of a novelty that stirred his cupidity, the pleasure of planning a campaign to secure possession, the working out of the details, and the glory of success, were more to Waddy than any other form of riches or exploit.

The Pack-rat is the Waddy of the mountains, or Waddy was the Pack-rat of the school. Imagine, if you would picture the Pack-rat, a small creature like a common rat, but with soft fur, a bushy tail, and soulful eyes, living the life of an ordinary rat in the woods, except that it has an extraordinary mania for collecting curios.

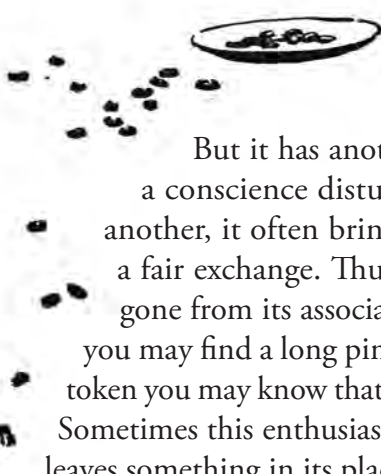
There can be little doubt that this began in the nest-building idea, and then, because it was necessary to protect his home, cactus leaves and thorny branches were piled on it. The instinct grew until to-day the nest of a Pack-rat is a mass of rubbish from one to four feet high, and four to eight feet across. I have examined many of these collections. They are usually around the trunks in a clump of low trees, and consist of a small central nest about eight inches across, warm and soft, with a great mass of sticks and thorns around and over this, leaving a narrow entrance well-guarded by an array of cactus spines; then on top of all, a most wonderful collection of pine cones, shells, pebbles, bones, scraps of paper and tin, and the skulls of other animals. And when the owner can add to these works of art or vertu a brass cartridge, a buckle or a copper rivet, his little bosom is doubtless filled with the same high joy that any great collector might feel on securing a Raphael or a Rembrandt.

I remember finding an old pipe in one Rat museum. Pistol cartridges are eagerly sought after,



so are saddle buckles, even if he has to cut them surreptitiously from the saddle of some camper. And when any of these articles are found missing it is usual to seek out the nearest Rat house, and here commonly the stolen goods are discovered shamelessly exposed on top. I remember hearing of a set of false teeth that were lost in camp, but rescued in this very way.

A FREE TRADER



"Pack" is a Western word meaning "carry," and thus the Rat that carries off things is the "Pack-rat."

But it has another peculiarity. As though it had a conscience disturbed by pilfering the treasure of another, it often brings back what may be considered a fair exchange. Thus a silver-plated spoon may have gone from its associate cup one night, but in that cup you may find a long pine cone or a surplus nail, by which token you may know that a Pack-rat has called and collected. Sometimes this enthusiastic fancier goes off with food, but leaves something in its place; in one case that I heard of, the Rat, either with a sense of humour or a mistaken idea of food values, after having carried off the camp biscuit, had filled the vacant dish with the round pellets known as "Elk sign." But evidently there is a disposition to deal fair; not to steal, but to trade. For this reason the creature is widely known as the "Trade Rat."

Although I have known the Pack-rat for years in the mountains, I never saw one within the strict lines of the Yellowstone sanctuary. But the guides all assure me that they are found and manifest the same disposition here as elsewhere. So that if you should lose sundry bright things around camp, or some morning find your boots stuffed with pebbles, deer sign, or thorns, do

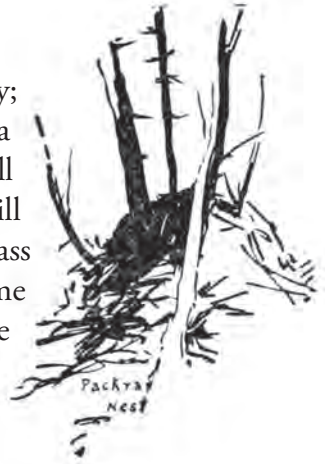


PHOTO BY G. G. SETON

(A) THE WHISTLER WATCHING ME FROM THE ROCKS.

(B) A YOUNG WHISTLER

not turn peevish or charge the guide with folly; it means, simply, you have been visited by a Mountain Rat, and any *uneatables* you miss will doubtless be found in his museum, which will be discovered within a hundred yards—a mass of sticks and rubbish under a tree—with some bright and shiny things on the top where the owner can sit amongst them on sunny days, and gloat till his little black eyes are a-swim, and his small heart filled with holy joy.



THE UPHEAVER—THE MOLE-GOPHER

As you cross any of the level, well-grassed prairie regions in the Yellowstone you will see piles of soft earth thrown up in little hillocks, sometimes a score or more of them bunched together. The drivers will tell you that these are molehills, which isn't quite true. For the Mole is a creature unknown in the Park, and the animal that makes these mounds is exceedingly abundant. It is the common Mole-gopher, a gopher related very distantly to the Prairie-dog and Mountain Whistler, but living the underground life of a Mole, though not even in the same order as that interesting miner, for the Mole-gopher is a rodent (Order *Rodentia*) and the Mole a bug-eater (Order *Insectivora*); just as different as Lion and Caribou.

The Mole-gopher is about the size of a rat, but has a short tail and relatively immense forepaws and claws. It is indeed wonderfully developed as a digger.

Examine the mound of earth thrown up. If it is a fair example, it will make fully half a bushel. Next count the mounds that are within a radius of fifty paces; probably all are the work of this Gopher, or rather this pair, for they believe in team play.

Search over the ground carefully, and you will discern that there are scores of ancient mounds flattened by the weather, and traces of hundreds, perhaps, that date from remote years.

Now multiply the size of one mound by the number of mounds, and you will have some idea of the work done by this pair. Finally, remembering that there may be a pair of Gophers for every acre in the Park, estimate the tons of earth moved by one pair and multiply it by the acres in the Park, and you will get an idea of the work done by those energetic rodents as a body, and you will realize how well he has won his Indian name, the "Upheaver."

We are accustomed to talk of upheaval in geology as a frightful upset of all nature, but here before our eyes is going on an upheaval of enormous extent and importance, but so gently and pleasantly done that we enjoy every phase of the process.

