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Charley Michael

An Appreciation By Walter Fitzpatrick



In the minds of an entire generation of Californian lovers of Nature, the names of Walden Pond and Thoreau are no more closely linked than those of Yosemite and "Charley" Michael. So then to essay an "explanation" of Charley, especially in a publication of this sort, could appear to be a footnote to the obvious were it not that perhaps a newer and less fortunate generation of lovers of natural beauty might enjoy a few brief paragraphs about one who is already a legendary figure.

Charles W. Michael was born in San Francisco on January 9, 1880 almost in the shadow of the famous Woodward's Gardens, the zoo of which was a feature attraction of an earlier and less sophisticated San Francisco. On more than one occasion Charley facetiously asserted that it was this circumstance which early instilled in him his love for birds and animals.

It is really significant that several of his formative years as a boy were spent on a ranch not far from San Luis Obispo. It was here, no doubt, that he became acquainted with Dame Nature, an acquaintance which grew progressively more virulent from year to year and ended only with his passing.

Returning to San Francisco while still a youth, Charley soon found himself on his own. It was in this school of hard knocks that he learned to know his way around among his own kind in a manner that molded real character, and always he remained true to his first love--Nature.

Perhaps the first practical lesson learned at the knees of his great teacher was that there are two classes of beings; the quick and the dead. Therefore, those of us privileged to know him well regret his almost too modest disinclination to "toot his own horn." Charley's adamant refusal to write an autobiography will remain the world's loss, for some of his "adventures" during that early period with a group that knew and admired the teachings of Jack London were such to make Jim Tully seem sissified in comparison. Many of his yarns anent these youthful days were as gripping as any ever told around any campfire anywhere.

Even during this period, however, Charley remained loyal to his mentor and made a number of pilgrimages to his several naturalistic shrines along our coast, adding always to his love for and knowledge of things out-of-doors. It was not until he came to live in Yosemite Valley that he really "arrived", literally and figuratively.

(continued on page 18)

This issue of the TANGER is dedicated to Charles W. Michael. He, with Mrs. Michael, were made honorary members of our Society many years ago for their outstanding contributions to the Audubon cause. Editor's note.

A WORD FROM OUR PRESIDENT:

"Dimout regulations have rediscovered an old familiar world for us in the sky with its constellations against the velvety curtain of night. For many years we have seen these manifestations in their perfection, only in retreats from the center of population. As excursions into other more accustomed avenues of nature are curtailed we may profitably turn to the heavens which are the oldest source of nature lore. Here where constellations have followed the same course throughout eons of time we have a strong example of the fundamental laws of nature. From time to time phenomena occur that are new and add to the interest of observation. Even today we are alert to the appearance of a new comet, which may be seen near the familiar constellation of Leo. Aside from the grandeur of the spectacle in the skies there is something warm and comforting in the thought that the same starry panorama sheds its light over our people in many places in the world and that we may all see the night as did William Cullen Bryant in these lines:

"The glorious hosts of light
Walk the dark atmosphere 'til she retires;
All through her silent watches gliding slow
Her constellations come and climb the heavens and go."

Charles W. Michael, An Appreciation - continued from first page.

In the Valley, in August 1919, he married Enid Reeves, a native daughter and botanist of note. She imparted her knowledge of botany to him and he in turn shared his wealth of bird lore with her and together they worked harmoniously through the years and up until the time of his death. Mrs. Michael is still carrying on, courageously, alone.

Most of us knew Charley as a Bird Man, but there were many more and fascinating facets to his character. Most interesting of these probably were his outstanding accomplishments as a mountaineer, and for those who want a real treat, a reference can be made to the files of the Sierra Club Bulletin. The story of the first ascent of "Michael Minaret" in the 1924 copy will prove of greatest interest to all who enjoy Nature in her less gentle moments. Even in these too few published articles there is the feeling that once again his innate modesty deprives us of something thrilling and fine.

It was only during his later years in Yosemite that I knew him and was privileged to become his almost constant companion. Despite the malevolence of Time which had greatly curtailed Charley's activities, these years were indescribably rich in companionship and the attempt to attain to the knowledge of nature, the tolerance, and above all, the inward harmony of one who was at home with Mother Earth.

Tolerance, tolerance, and more tolerance; that was the keynote which supported his philosophy. Only of intolerance was he intolerant. In his scheme of things there was room for everything, even (with a bow to Channing Pollock) for those who "bring nothing with them and take nothing away."

It is to be hoped that this eulogy does not conjure up a mental image of a sort of open air "Mr. Chips," for nothing could be farther from the case. Actually, Charley never lost the cynicism formed in his "Jack London" period, but throughout the years it was refined and mellowed to an amused skepticism which led him to believe, in effect, that this was the "best of all possible worlds and everything in it is a necessary evil." But while fully aware of the cruelty of existence he was consequently even more aroused to its beautiful aspects.

Charley's death, almost coincident with our formal entry into the war was well timed, for he had anticipated in detail what lay ahead of us and actually felt that he would not be on hand to see the end of a way of living he loved.

To be sentimental is pretty bad-- no one would agree more readily than Charley-- but surely when the white-throated swifts return each spring to Yosemite, the "Commander-in-Chief of the Cosmos" will give Charley a furlough to be on hand to greet these favorites among his feathered friends. Meanwhile, all of us who knew and loved him can but carry on his work in a manner however inadequate.

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WELCOME NEW MEMBERS

Los Angeles:

Mr. Charles Brown, 1319 S. Hoover St.
Mrs. I. O. Clay, 6409 Holmes Ave.
Mr. George W. Patterson, 5115 - 5th Ave.
Mrs. Richard A. Robinet, 1012 W. 74th St.

MRS. ROBERT LEWIS, who lives near the San Gabriel River Bird Sanctuary, writes: "Recently the Sanctuary has seemed more interesting than ever. Last Sunday's bird walk brought a check list of 71 birds. The warm mid-days are a delight to the birds; they feel as if spring were here.

They haven't rationed hope,
Nor happiness, nor health;
But I'd rather wish you these
Than all the taxable wealth!

Membership Dues: Annual \$1.50, Sustaining \$5 annually, Life \$25, Patron \$100.

FEBRUARY CALENDAR

DOUBLE FEATURE FIELD TRIP: Field Trip #1: Feb. 4, 1943. Echo Park at 9:30 a.m. Take Hollywood Car at Subway Terminal, 417 S. Hill St. 5¢ fare. Get off at Park Ave. and Glendale Blvd. Bring stale bread and enjoy feeding gulls and ducks. Study at close hand Lesser Scaups, Baldpate Ducks, Herring, Ring-billed and Glaucous-winged Gulls, a Cackling Goose, Kingfisher, Anthony Green Heron and Pied-billed Grebes, all of special interest. Bring lunch as usual.

Field Trip #2: Thursday, Feb. 4, 1943: Recreation Gun Club grounds off Washington Street for those who like a hard bird trip entailing long walks over marsh trails which will be highly rewarded by close observation of numbers of ducks. Take lunch. Meet at corner of Washington Street and Ocean Ave. at 9:30 a.m. Take "W" car around 8:15 to end of line- Rimpau Blvd. 7¢ fare. Then take Culver City bus which connects with "W" car. Get four tokens for 25¢ - fare costs two tokens each way. Get off at corner Washington Street and Ocean Ave. Bird walk will start from there.

BOARD MEETING: Thursday, February 18, 10 a.m. at the home of Mrs. Holden, 2902 So. Western Avenue.

PROGRAM MEETING: Thursday, February 18, 1:30 p.m. State Bldg., Exposition Park. "Exploring the Insect World," with Mr. W. Scott Lewis as speaker should give us a program of exceptional interest. Mr. Lewis is an eloquent and interesting speaker and speaks authoritatively on many different subjects. He is well known and highly respected by Pacific Coast educators. In his study of insects under high magnification he has found a world "so different from ours that a visit to it is like being transported to another planet."

REMEMBER THE CHANGE IN TIME. 1:30 p.m. instead of 2 p.m. as formerly.

STUDY CLASSES: Thursday, February 25, at Plummer Park, 7377 Santa Monica Blvd.

Nature Study: 10 a.m. Subject- "Garden Herbs," Speaker, Mrs. Janet Wright.

Birds: 11: a.m., Subject: "Bird Migration" by Mr. W. A. Kent.

THE FORTY-THIRD ANNUAL CHRISTMAS BIRD COUNT

The Los Angeles Bird Count was taken December 20, 1942, by thirty observers, representing the Los Angeles Audubon Society, the Pasadena Audubon Society and the Southwest Bird Study Club. Territory: Section of Los Angeles radiating $7\frac{1}{2}$ miles from La Cienega and Airdrome Crossing, taking in short stretches of seashore, sloughs, four city parks, canyons on south and west slopes of Griffith Park, foothills within specified area and city reservoirs, - handicapped by military restrictions. Dense fog along shore and inland areas until 10:30 A.M. Visibility at times only 30 feet. Fog lifted briefly, then settled again until noon. Clear but hazy throughout balance of day. Temperature, 41 degrees at start, 45 degrees at return.

LOONS: Common, 3; Pacific, 2.

GREBES: Eared, 52; Western, 119; Pied-billed, 24.

PELICANS and CORMORANTS: California Brown Pelican, 12; Farallon Cormorant, 24.

HERONS, Etc.: California Heron, 9; American Egret, 27; Brewster's

Egret, 26; Black-crowned Night Heron, 74; American Bittern, 3.

DUCKS, GEESE, Etc.: Cackling Goose, 1; Mallard, 3; Baldpate, 2; Pintail, 171; Green-winged Teal, 6; Blue-winged Teal, 2 (Watched for some time by Kents-Curry through high-powered glasses); Shoveller, 15; Ring-necked Duck, 7; Lesser Scaup Duck, 235; American Golden-eye, 3; Buffle-head, 1; White-winged Scoter, 6; Surf Scoter, 365; Ruddy Duck, 118; American Merganser, 15; Red-breasted Merganser, 37.

HAWKS: Sharp-shinned, 3; Cooper's, 4; Red-tailed, 11; Red-bellied, 1; Ferruginous Rough-leg, 1 (Closely observed while flying low by Mr. and Mrs. Barton Lewis and Miss Ware who are familiar with this species); Marsh, 6; Sparrow, 31.

QUAIL: California, 139.

CRANES, RAILS, Etc.: Coot, 614.

SHORE-BIRDS: Snowy Plover, 10; Semi-palmated Plover, 81; Killdeer, 196; Black-bellied Plover, 207; Long-billed Curlew, 1; Hudsonian Curlew, 14; Spotted Sandpiper, 3; Willet, 445; Greater Yellow-legs, 8; Least Sandpiper, 191; Long-billed Dowitcher, 106; Western Sandpiper, 368; Marbled Godwit, 412; Sanderling, 182; Avocet, 42; Glaucous-winged Gull, 98; Western Gull, 96; Herring Gull, 4; California Gull, 45; Ring-billed Gull, 2003; Bonaparte's Gull, 206; Heermann's Gull, 2; Forster's Tern, 406; Common Tern, 4; Caspian Tern, 1.

PIGEONS, DOVES: Mourning Dove, 49; Chinese Spotted Dove, 93; Ringed Turtle Dove, 12.

ROAD-RUNNERS: Roadrunner, 2.

OWLS: Screech, 1; Long-eared, 2 (Evidently same pair returning to this secluded tall tree area for past three years, - W. Scott Lewis).

SWIFTS and HUMMINGBIRDS: White-throated Swift, 15; Anna's Hummingbird, 134.

KINGFISHERS: Belted Kingfisher, 10.

WOODPECKERS: Red-shafted Flicker, 93; California Woodpecker, 13; Willow Woodpecker, 1; Nuttall's Woodpecker, 2.

PERCHING BIRDS: Black Phoebe, 95; Say's Phoebe, 8; California Jay, 175; Bailey's Chickadee, 2; San Diego Titmouse, 45; Coast Bush-Tit, 376; Pallid Wren-Tit, 225; House Wren, 4; San Diego Wren, 33; Tule Wren, 29; Mockingbird, 93; California Thrasher, 69; Robin, 147; Hermit Thrush, 26; Western Gnatcatcher, 13; Ruby-crowned Kinglet, 70; American Pipit, 4; Cedar Waxwing, 158; California Shrike, 26; Hutton's Vireo, 3; Dusky Warbler, 3; Audubon's Warbler, 1969; Tule Yellow-throat, 28; English Sparrow, 140; Western Meadowlark, 186; San Diego Red-Wing, 14; Brewer's Blackbird, 2417; Western Tanager, 1 (observed in tree for several minutes about noon time, - Combys); Eastern Cardinal, 1 (observed feeding in nearby bushes, - Eckelberry, Groner, Hoffman); Calif. Purple Finch, 10; Willow Goldfinch, 48; Green-backed Goldfinch, 121; San Diego Towhee, 77; Calif. Towhee, 413; House Finch, 974.

Sparrows: Savannah, 18; Belding's 50; Large-billed, 2; Lark, 3; Rufous-crowned, 11; Thurber's Junco, 23; Chipping, 8; Gambel's, 705; Golden-crowned, 87; Fox, 21; Song, 123.

Total Species.....121

Total Individuals (Est.) 16,784

Compiled by

Mrs. Caroline H. Daugherty,
Field Leader, L. A. Audubon Society

(Shortly before Mr. Michael left us he contributed the following articles to be used in the Tanager.)



CALIFORNIA JAY

The California Woodpecker cracks his walnuts by dropping them from the top of a tall telephone pole to a hard pavement. The California Jay, also a resourceful bird, has a different method. He collects nuts and drops them into the bird bath. Soaking over night, the seams of the walnut loosen and the nut may easily be pried open by the strong bill of the jay.

Many people who maintain bird feeding stations have told me that the jay is a bully and that he drives other birds away. For twenty years in the Yosemite Valley and for almost as many winters I kept a bird feeding station and in all these years although jays were steady patrons of the station I have had no reason to consider them as unwelcome guests. Surely there is no evidence that they abuse the smaller birds. Even here in Pasadena with California jays coming daily to the bird bath and feeding tray, I have yet to see any indication that they drive other birds from the yard. And it must be remembered that the jays are good watchmen and that they warn all other birds in case of danger.

THE CALIFORNIA WOODPECKER, A CLEVER BIRD

As individual survivors of old groves there are many walnut trees scattered about the city of Pasadena. These trees, now neglected, furnish food for birds of several species. California woodpeckers are among the birds that help to harvest the walnut crop. The California woodpeckers, famous for their acorn storing habit, also store walnuts to tide them over the lean winter months. In storing walnuts the method employed is somewhat different from the method usually employed when storing acorns. The acorns are stored whole each in its own pit while the walnuts are stored piece-meal in the long fissures that open up in the old telephone poles. To get at the meat of the walnut the shell must be broken. Of course with the walnut properly wedged in some suitable crevice the woodpecker with its sharp bill could crack the nut, however, these wise birds have discovered a more efficient method. The walnuts are carried to the top of the storage pole, dropped to the cement sidewalk where they crack open. The meat is then gathered and poked away into the cracks of the cupboard pole.

For more than a mere hammer does the California Woodpecker use his head.



THE MOCKER AND THE PHOEBE

The mockingbird that lives in our neighborhood seems to think that he is monarch of all he surveys and being courageous as well as belligerent this is more or less true. There is an old saying that "birds of a feather flock together" but this is not true in regard to the mockingbird for he will permit no bird of his kind to encroach upon his territory. Birds of other species he will tolerate except for the Black Phoebe. Both the phoebe and the mocker like the same perch on the peak of the roof, however, there is a much more vital issue between the birds. Food, strange as it may seem, is the real cause of the animosity between them.

The grape-like berries that hang in clusters from the ampelopsis vine are a favorite food of both phoebe and mocker. From his perch on the roof the mocker can guard his vineyard, but with so much to attend to in the neighborhood the vineyard is often left unguarded and then phoebe, an expert in plucking insects from the air, can swoop in and pluck his share of the grapes while on the wing.

Knowing the usual feeding habits of phoebes and mockingbirds I was much surprised to find that there was a clash of interests along the forage lanes between these birds.

THE SANDERLING

The Sanderling: "He nests within the Arctic Circle and winters on the beaches of the world." We like the Sanderling, Mrs. Michael and I, and our pet name for him is "Twinkle-toes." How he can twinkle those black feet of his as he races before the surf fronds that slide up the wet sands. Now he turns quickly about to follow the receding wave back to the sea, his feet race not so madly for he is busy jabbing here and there for sand insects that have been uncovered by the backwash of the wave.

The sanderlings are social birds, they feed in flocks, they wing away in compact flocks, uttering little twit notes as they take wing. Occasionally, however, there may be an outcast, a belligerent little grumpy who will have nothing to do with any of his kind. Grumpy is a lone wolf who seemingly wears a chip on his shoulder and when approached by any other bird he declares war. He puts his head down, hunches his shoulders, ruffles his feathers and trots forward to meet the one who dares to poach on the beat that he claims for his very own. Sometimes the intruder accepts the challenge and then the rivals lay to like a couple of game cocks. Usually it is Grumpy who wins the battle.

Along with other sandpipers the sanderlings are occasionally seen feeding on the mudflats of bays and lagoons, but surely they prefer the clean sands of the outer beaches where they can play tag with the sea.

Beautiful indeed is the sight of a compact flock of sanderlings feeding in the moonlight and mysterious, too, for the magic moving carpet they spread on the wet sands does a disappearing act before one's very eyes. Racing before the incoming wave, all white breasts gleaming in the moonlight, the silvery carpet slides up the wet sand like a patch of detached and silent surf fronds, then as the birds turn about in unison, brown backs to the moon, the picture flashes off from the screen to appear again as the birds turn about to come racing in before the next incoming wave.



O.H.

RUFOUS-CROWNED SPARROW

On the morning of April 13, we were walking down the Arroyo below Devil's Gate and as we approached the bank of the nesting Rough-winged Swallows a song new to our ears was heard. Perched on a brush pile and singing a soft little trill was a small sparrow. The song was reminiscent of the Song Sparrow song, but it was not so musical nor so forcefully uttered. It began abruptly and ended abruptly. The tone quality of the song seemed a trifle scratchy to my ear. The singer was apparently performing for its mate as a second bird was hopping about and scratching for food under the cover of the artemesia bushes.

In size and general appearance the bird was much like the Chipping Sparrow, but of a more chunky build and when facing head-on the face markings were more conspicuous. They reminded me of the face markings of the Lark Sparrow, with stripes radiating away from the bill. The lower back was reddish brown, about the same color as the crown patch. The breast was smoky gray and unmarked.

The Rufous-crowned Sparrows were located on a brushy slope leading up from the arroyo bottom. Sage, artemesia, poison oak and other shrubs formed the cover and there were a few scattered live oaks rising from the low growing chaparral. The singer never perched high; he sang from low bushes while the female scratched under the bushes. Three successive days I visited the sparrows and not once did I see the singer foraging for food. On the third day the birds were found about a quarter mile distance from where they were originally seen.

The Rufous-crowned Sparrow was new to me, but now that I have made his acquaintance I am sure that I will recognize him if ever I see him again. I am not so sure that I shall recognize his song, but I think so.