

Yellowstone Nature Notes:

A Neglected Documentary Resource

by Paul Schullery and Lee Whittlesey

The documentary legacy of Yellowstone is huge: thousands of books; more thousands of scientific reports and papers; newspaper and magazine articles beyond counting; and a still poorly identified wealth of other materials, including unpublished journals; commercial pamphlets and circulars; administrative records of managers, concessioners, and interest groups; and visitors' letters, postcards, and related memorabilia in almost unimaginable abundance. Between us, we have devoted more than half a century to the study of this overwhelming mass of stuff, and though we both have personal favorites, we agree that there is nothing else like *Yellowstone Nature Notes*. For its bottomless reservoir of intriguing natural history tidbits, its hundreds of short essays and reports on all kinds of engaging subjects, and its unmatched window onto the day-to-day doings of earlier generations of Yellowstone nature lovers, *Yellowstone Nature Notes* is unique, priceless, and a lot of fun. It is also a neglected chapter in Yellowstone's rich documentary history.

On June 14, 1920, Yellowstone's Park Naturalist, Milton P. Skinner, issued a brief typescript report containing notes on flowers, geology, animals, and birds. Similar brief reports appeared in July, August, and September of that year, and in June, July, and August of 1921. In July, August, and September 1922, these were issued more formally, typeset, and printed. Apparently they were distributed through park offices, but may also have been posted at a few locations in the park.

These modest reports were the beginning of *Yellowstone Nature Notes*. It would become one of Yellowstone's longest, most informative, and certainly most entertaining literary traditions, a tradition that took a more mature form on June 20, 1924 (none are known to have appeared in 1923), with the appearance of Volume 1, Number 1, of a typescript (apparently mimeographed) newsletter with the actual title *Yellowstone Nature Notes*. Later writers and researchers seem to have routinely regarded the 1920–1922 reports as early issues of *Yellowstone Nature Notes*, but the name was not actually used until 1924, when the series also acquired issue numbers.

Though it seems likely that *Nature Notes* was intended especially for park staff and other locals, it was available to a wider audience. The first issue explained that "This is the initial number of a series of bulletins to be issued from time to time for the information of those interested in the natural history and scientific features of Yellowstone National Park and the unmatched educational opportunities offered by this region. Copies of these bulletins will be mailed free to those who can use of them. Write or telephone your request to the Information Office at Mammoth Hot Springs, or call there in person, and your name will be placed on the regular mailing list."

Nature Notes was not unique to Yellowstone. Many other parks launched similarly named newsletters. National Park Service director Stephen T. Mather and Yellowstone Superintendent Albright

placed a high value on educational activities, and the *Nature Notes* program flourished for many years. In 1936, Hazel Hunt Voth produced a "General Index to the 'Nature Notes' Published in Various National Parks 1920–1936," a large volume funded by the Works Progress Administration and published by the National Park Service from the Park Service's Berkeley, California, office. By that time, Acadia (beginning in 1932), Crater Lake (1928), Glacier (1927), Grand Canyon (1926), Grand Teton (1935), Hawaii (1931), Hot Springs (1934), Lassen (1932, combined with Hawaii), Mesa Verde (1930), Mount Rainier (1923), Rocky Mountain (1928), Shenandoah (1936), Yosemite (1922), and Zion/Bryce (1929) had joined Yellowstone in producing their own *Nature Notes*.

National park history enthusiasts may enjoy knowing that the Voth bibliography reveals that *Nature Notes* added an obscure additional element to the long-time rivalry between the two "Y-parks," each of which has been championed for being first at various things. Voth's *Nature Notes* bibliography dated the beginning of *Yellowstone Nature Notes* to that first June 1920 report, though Yosemite seems to have launched its *Nature Notes* by that name in July 1922, earlier than Yellowstone produced its own similarly named version. Advocates and partisans are free to interpret this chain of events however best favors their predispositions.

Discussing the production of *Nature Notes* by the various parks, Voth noted that "publication in some cases has been



erratic; in some cases it has been suspended. . . .” The sustained production of any sort of report or newsletter, year after year, administration after administration, is very difficult in any bureaucracy, and it must have been especially so in some of these perpetually understaffed national parks. That makes the steady appearance of *Yellowstone Nature Notes* until the end of 1958 an almost heroic achievement. Through the administrations of six superintendents, and seven park naturalists and chief park naturalists (they became “chiefs” once there was more than one of them; today they are called chiefs of interpretation), *Nature Notes* was produced faithfully, evidence of considerable commitment to this form of education. We would enjoy hearing from any readers with more information about the *Nature Notes* program throughout the parks. It does appear that some centralized authority must have been taking part, because of similarities in design and approach. We have not yet canvassed many other parks to learn how long they produced their own *Nature Notes*.

Interpretation is a term that still must confuse many visitors; park staff who educate the public have long been called interpreters. Milton Skinner, more or less the father of *Yellowstone Nature Notes*, had come to Yellowstone in 1895 as a walking-tour guide for the Yellowstone Park Association (a hotel concessioner). In the 1920s, he would eventually write a series of influential books and articles about the park’s wildlife and other natural attractions. (Skinner is one of many Yellowstone figures deserving of further study.) Prior to the creation of the National Park Service in 1916, and even before the creation of the education division of the park service in 1920, virtually all interpretive activities were performed by park concessioner employees, primarily stagecoach drivers (who gave mile-by-mile commentary) and hotel porters (who gave walking tours of the thermal areas), but also by the occasional independent educator or outfitter. Skinner was not the first Yellowstone interpreter, but he was a longtime public educator even before the park’s administrators defined their own responsibilities in the field.

Skinner, while working for the park

engineers in 1913, suggested that a “bureau of information” be established to educate visitors. Though we do not know what influence his specific suggestion may have had, the spirit of that suggestion was finally acted upon by Superintendent Horace Albright in 1920, when he hired Skinner as the park’s first “park naturalist.” Here again some confusion exists; the label “naturalist” customarily means someone who studies nature, but in park jargon, it more specifically means someone who gives talks, walks, and otherwise conducts interpretive activities. Skinner very quickly created the little monthly nature reports mentioned above, the precursors to *Yellowstone Nature Notes*. But Skinner, who is remembered now as having a difficult personality, ceased being park naturalist in September of 1922. In June 1923, Frank Thone was named acting park naturalist, a position he held until late August. It seems likely that these administrative changes may explain the hiatus in the production of the nature reports that year.

Edmund J. Sawyer became park naturalist in 1924 and soon started the actual *Yellowstone Nature Notes*. With the fourth issue, the publication was given a cover sheet and more or less assumed the look that it would have for the next thirty-four years. Sawyer, some of whose artwork is in the park’s collection, is probably responsible for many of the early illustrations in *Yellowstone Nature Notes*—simple little line drawings and marginal sketches that became a hallmark of the publication until its final issue.

Subsequent park naturalists, including Dorr Yeager, who took over in 1928, continued Skinner’s approach with few material changes. Bird and wildlife observations, provided by various park staff or consolidated by the editor, were routinely provided, as was the occasional staff- or park resident-written poem and drawing. Reports on geysers and hot springs appeared regularly. As time passed, articles got longer and more and more voices were heard, often with bylines. Articles on park history were added as early as 1925. Book reviews, hiking tales, and quotable quotes became regular features.

Yellowstone Nature Notes seems from the beginning to have served as an “offi-

cial” voice for the park administration. Whether exhorting readers to enjoy wildflowers or not feed the bears, staff members who wrote the articles were treating the pages of *Nature Notes* as an extension of their public contacts in evening campfire programs, along park roads, and anywhere else that they worked. At times some important management issue, such as elk population controversies, would be covered in considerable depth. All of these materials, representing as they did the park service leadership’s views, make *Nature Notes* an important source for administrative history, complementing a variety of other materials such as monthly and annual reports, and official correspondence.

At the same time, the shorter notes on wildlife sightings, the “leaves from our diaries” and other brief notes, each of which might seem so slight by itself, gradually piled up into a formidable miscellany, providing a surprising volume of information on many species of park wildlife. The most popular species, such as bears and elk, were ultimately mentioned in hundreds of short notes, some quite informative and all intelligently reported. Any researcher newly engaged in studying some species of park wildlife would be well served to start by cruising through the excellent indexes that were periodically issued for *Nature Notes*.

But perhaps the least appreciated aspect of *Nature Notes* is its relevance to social history. The moods and ideals portrayed in these gentle reports, notes, and observations—about nature, about life in wild country, about the place of national parks in society—make *Nature Notes* a fine source of impressions about social values, as well as about the day-to-day textures of park residence. We can imagine some enterprising graduate student in recreational sociology or environmental history using either *Yellowstone Nature Notes* or the entire set of series from all the parks to examine changing values and ideas in national parks over four decades. In a lighter mood, the senior author of this paper used many of the short anecdotes and stories from *Yellowstone Nature Notes* as chapters in *Yellowstone Bear Tales* (1991), a book of readings that represented dozens of individuals’ experiences with park bears before World War II.

Similar compilations about wildlife or other park lore would probably also be well received.

Among the subjects that we have not adequately researched is the apparently general demise of *Nature Notes* around the park system. In Yellowstone, it occurred at the end of 1958. The final issue included a report on Firehole thermal basin hot spring activity in 1958, and another on Mammoth Hot Springs by Chief Park Naturalist David deL. Condon. Former Yellowstone Park Historian Aubrey Haines recently responded to our query about the abrupt cessation of publication of *Nature Notes* after so many years:

“*Yellowstone Nature Notes* died quietly with V. XXXII, No. 6 (November–December 1958), and without a hint that was to be the last issue. I was in engineering at the time, so do not know what was behind the decision to stop. There is no clue in the header, which solicits articles and carried the usual statement of purpose.”

Aubrey suggested that someone may just have decided that *Nature Notes* had become “superfluous.” Changing attitudes about interpretive style or the perhaps old-fashioned tone of the publication may have been factors. In the late 1950s, traditional observational “natural history” was falling out of favor perhaps even more than it had been in previous decades, replaced by more rigorous scientific techniques. For many years, park service naturalists had been jokingly referred to as “Sunday supplement scientists” for their simple nature lessons, and perhaps the criticisms were part of the reason for the end of *Nature Notes*. On the other hand, perhaps it was just practical needs, or bureaucratic whim, that one day led to a decision (either in the National Park Service or in each park individually) to invest limited staff resources in other things. So far our inquiries among park service people who recall the period have not yielded many clues about why *Nature Notes* disappeared. Perhaps one of our readers may know more. John Good, who would later serve as Yellowstone’s chief of interpretation, recalls that in 1959 he was working in the service’s Washington office, where he would have heard if there had been any

general order to cease producing *Nature Notes*, and no such order was given. Linda Eade, librarian at Yosemite, tells us that when *Yosemite Nature Notes* ceased publication in 1962, it was said to be the result of “rising costs, diminishing manpower, and the changing times.”

A variant form of the newsletter appeared very quickly. Again, Aubrey Haines:

“After I became park historian, I did attempt a resurrection in the form of *The Yellowstone Interpreter*, which had during its two-year life the purpose that always appeared on the title page: ‘The purpose of this publication is to provide scientific and historical data for the use of Park personnel engaged in interpretive activities.’”

The Yellowstone Interpreter was published occasionally through 1963 and 1964. It was to “appear at random, depending upon availability of suitable material, and employees are urged to contribute articles.” Most of it was written by Aubrey himself, who was then researching *The Yellowstone Story* (1977), his history of the park, and who provided a series of authoritative sketches of historical characters and events. Its intended audience, park interpreters, was more limited than that of the original *Nature Notes*, and it is not nearly as well known, though the writing was of higher quality. It ended when Aubrey was transferred to another position.

Since then, several attempts have been made to revive some form of newsletter for Yellowstone’s interpreters. Between December 1969 and November 1980, the interpretive division under chiefs William Dunmire and Alan Mebane occasionally issued an off-season newsletter, usually with a mixture of natural history and administrative news. These seem to have been produced almost exclusively for communicating with seasonals who were elsewhere at the time. The park’s research library has files of these, but of course because of their intermittent publication schedule (never more than two a year) it is difficult to know if the set is complete. During the administration of George Robinson, the interpretive division produced an occasional newsletter known as “Out of Touch,” especially for the faraway seasonals, to keep them posted

on new developments in the park. The library holds one or two of these per year from 1983 to 1992. One of the chief distinctions between these later permutations on the *Nature Notes* then and the original is that the latter are progressively more candid about matters of budget and agency politics.

The desire for something more like the old *Nature Notes* never went away. In 1974, Mammoth Subdistrict Ranger Secretary Chris Judson started a new “Nature Notes” by including it in the biweekly employee newsletter, *Yellowstone News*. The first issue, January 25, 1974, encouraged employee contributions and summarized a number of wildlife observations by park staff (including the winter waterfowl count) who already were in touch with her. Chris maintained a large network of contacts throughout the park, and eventually persuaded a number of people, including veteran seasonal ranger Wayne Replogle and Gardiner, Montana, tackle shop owner Richard Parks, to contribute substantial series of items. On May 16, 1974, she changed the name to *Field Notes*, with the hope that this would “better express what we’d like this section to be. Hopefully it will serve as one more avenue of communication, providing information on what’s happening in Yellowstone. This is of interest to everybody, but will be especially useful to those who meet the public and need to keep as up-to-date as possible on many aspects of the park . . .” It included announcements about new employees, observations of wildlife, and reports on snow conditions, among many other matters. Though Chris moved to Bandelier National Monument (from where she recently provided us with information) in April 1976, *Field Notes* continued to appear in the employee newsletter fairly regularly until November 24, 1976, under unknown editorship.

In August of 1995, the Grant Village interpretive staff under the leadership of Matt Graves, issued a continuation of the original *Yellowstone Nature Notes* (Volume 33, Number 1), quoting the original *Nature Notes*’ masthead for its purpose. This single issue contained articles about the history of *Nature Notes*, the newly arrived wolves, elk observation, and swan nesting. A “Leaves from our Diaries”

section contained reports in the style of the original *Nature Notes*, brief observations on wildlife sightings of note. As far as we can determine, no subsequent issues were produced, and the effort was redirected to an annually updated information book; Yellowstone Assistant Chief of Interpretation Linda Young recalls that “what began as a sort of *Nature Notes* revival turned into what we nowadays call the ‘Interpreter’s Handbook.’” A variety of even smaller circulation newsletters, such as the South District Interpreter’s Newsletter (known during part of its 1985–1986 run as “Chautauqua”) have come and gone with the staff who created them.

By far the most important and durable descendant of *Nature Notes* appeared in May 1985, with the appearance of a newsletter entitled *Resource Management*, edited and in good part written by Sue Consolo (now Sue Consolo Murphy), resource management biologist with an interpretive background. Sue, now editor of both this newsletter and *Yellowstone Science*, remembers the plan this way:

“The original hope was monthly in summer and bimonthly in winter, and I came close to meeting that goal for some years. It was [*Supervisory Resource Management Specialist*] Stu Coleman who, witty weird-humor guy that he was, named it *The Buffalo Chip*, beginning with the January–February 1988 issue.”

The Buffalo Chip, which has had a steadily growing mailing and in-house reading list, reports in more depth than did previous newsletters on a great variety of natural and cultural resource management projects and concerns. Almost entirely staff-written, it has now tracked fourteen years of park management issues, making it an important source of the month-to-month concerns of management, and a treasure chest of information.

The latest and most publicly visible chapter in the *Nature Notes* saga is *Yellowstone Science*. The idea seems to have resulted from conversations in 1990 and 1991 among then-superintendent Bob Barbee, then-chief of research John Varley, and then-resource naturalist Paul Schullery. As the park’s many resource-related controversies grew more and more heated and complex, and as the public’s

appetite for information about the park grew not only larger but also more sophisticated, all agreed that there was need for a publication that could do justice to the growing amount of research conducted in the park. The first issue appeared with Paul as editor in Fall 1992, and it has remained a (fairly faithful) quarterly publication since then. Sue Consolo Murphy assumed the editorship with Volume 4, Number 3 (summer 1996), and publication costs are largely covered by a grant from the Yellowstone Association with additional donations by readers.

In contrast with previous publications, *Yellowstone Science* has been almost entirely written by the researchers themselves. Except for the news and notes at the back of each issue, most of the feature articles were submitted by the researchers themselves, who came from a wide variety of universities and other institutions. To vary the presentation, most issues have included one interview with some noteworthy researcher, visiting scientist, or, in one case, a retiring administrator (Bob Barbee).

A thorough listing of informational newsletters about Yellowstone would have to include quite a few others. One especially long-lived and valuable contribution has been a concessioner’s *Commentary Newsletter*, originated by Gerard and Helen Pesman under the transportation division of the Yellowstone Park Company in 1973. Produced for the company’s bus drivers, commentators, and snowcoach drivers, this publication has long been a primary source of information on natural and cultural history, with many extended articles based on extensive study by the editors. Lee Whittlesey assumed the editorship in 1978 and continued it until 1980, when publication ceased. It has since been revived by Leslie Quinn, and is still regularly produced. And now that there are literally dozen of Yellowstone-related web sites, any bibliography of *Nature Notes* descendants (whether conscious or inadvertent) will become a very complicated thing.

Nature Notes and its children have left us an impressive volume of information and have revealed a remarkable devotion to education of staff and the public. These obscure publications have also tracked

park issues and social scenes across almost eighty years of Yellowstone’s history. Very few modern researchers, though perhaps well aware of *Yellowstone Science*, have ever heard of its “original” ancestor, and are missing a wonderful opportunity. Perhaps it will contain nothing of use to your project, but you’ll never know until you look. We can almost guarantee that you’ll spend more time with it than you expected to. All of the publications mentioned here are in the Yellowstone National Park Research Library, in the basement of the Horace Albright Visitor Center at Mammoth Hot Springs.

We believe that there are a number of graduate research or writing projects waiting to be extracted from *Nature Notes*. One would be a history of the *Nature Notes* program throughout the National Park Service: who originated it and why? How specific were the marching orders given to individual parks about the production of their *Nature Notes*? Did managers perceive it as a public educational tool, and, if so, how did they use it? Did it just die a “natural death” in each park for local reasons, or was its departure centrally decreed? This sizeable and fascinating documentary resource has much to teach us, not only about natural history but also about the culture of the National Park Service and the people who came to the parks to enjoy nature.

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