

Winding Trails: by Al Hobart

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Young's Valley Campout with Gardners

For those who love the uncontaminated air to breathe, invigorating exercise and an appetite that makes anything edible a luxury, there's nothing quite like foraging in a high mountain meadow for 2 or 3 days of clambering about in the adjoining mountains, studying and enjoying the things that live and grow all about us and the marvelous contours and intricate structure of the earth that gives us all – plant and animal alike – a toe-hold in space.

Youngs Valley is a super mountain meadow, one of the largest and most magnificent in our whole Illinois Valley area, just beyond the head of the East Fork and tipping over into the Indian Creek-Klamath drainage. Overshadowed by beautiful El Capitan mountain and entirely surrounded by impressive peaks it is a camper's delight – if you like mile-high atmosphere and rugged mountain scenery.

Among other things, Youngs Valley is a natural flower garden, where colorful

species march continuously through the long season, following in each other's footsteps from the time of the earliest snow-melt until the end of summer. Then as the receding snow line backs up the sides of the high mountains rare and fascinating alpine species come quickly into bloom, and lie waiting in their hidden crevices, restricted moist areas and on sunny ledges for the few lucky botanists and their eager amateur satellites to climb to their lofty perches and pay them homage.

I was recently invited by Ben and Lola Gardner, my beachcombing Pistol River friends whom I first met in our favorite botanizing nook a number of years ago, to join them for a 2 or 3 day sojourn in Youngs Valley. Any other projects I might have had in mind were immediately advanced to other rectangles on the calendar. Gardner's, with Veva Stansell, another enthusiastic amateur botanist and her young niece Chrissie who live in Gold Beach, were to show up in our alpine meeting place on Sunday. But, being all hopped up about the coming funfest, I couldn't wait. So on Saturday morning I loaded my camping equipment on Little Toot and took to the winding, climbing road up Bearcamp Ridge, past Sanger and Young's Peaks and on into Youngs Valley.

After setting up camp in the lower end of the long, flower-bedecked meadow, with camera and lunch in my small pack I hiked up the steep Poker Flat trail a couple of miles to where the Lewisias put on a beautiful display when their blooming season rolls around. One flower I found on a high rocky ridge up there earlier this month was so strange I sent it to the University of California for identification and was informed that it could be a new variety. There's always that thrill to look forward to in wildplant exploring.

Sunday morning my gang showed up, accompanied by Roy, a visiting botanist from Seattle, and Gordon, a geology instructor, who is camped temporarily on Pistol River with a bevy of geology students from the U of Wisconsin.

Shortly after their arrival Ben, Gordon and I struck out for Cyclone Gap, hiking the 2 or 3 miles up the old washed-out chrome road from Bell Echo. When Ben and Gordon had checked over the various rocks in the neighborhood of the old mine up there to their satisfaction, Gordon went charging on to Preston Peak while Ben and I botanized the south side of El Capitan, continuing on to the very peak, first time on the summit for either of us.

Back in camp at the

end of the day, and in the final stages of starvation, we almost foundered on the unbelievable campfire feast that Lola and Veva whipped up for the gang. I made the rounds of the bubbling kettles and steaming dishes and the big coffee pot so many times that I barely had room left for a piece each of Lola's delicious blackberry and huckleberry pie.

Next morning, after a light breakfast of ham, eggs, hotcakes, syrup, jam and coffee, all of us but Gordon, who had to get back to the flatlands, climbed up the trail to Twin Lakes at the north base of El Capita, and then took to the very steep side of the mountain itself. We spent several hours climbing and botanizing the mountainside, and in all of my wildplant hunting in our mountains I've never once come across such a profusion and varied alpine flower display.

At the higher elevations a few plants of the rare yellow-flowered Howell's Draba were found mingling with the spectacular Mountain Pasque-flower. This largest and showiest of the anemones, with its stout hairy stem and soft-hairy finely divided foliage, has attractive white flowers 2 inches or more across with a central large group of bright yellow pistils and stamens. When the pistils at maturity

develop into the many single-seeded fruits or achenes, each of these produces a feathery appendage an inch or two long, and eventually, before dispersal by the wind, the 'feathers' collectively form a large silvery, globular head. This attractive phenomenon gives rise to another apt name for this plant – Old Man of the Mountain.

We found the lovely little pink and white mountain heathers, each belonging to a different genus, growing side by side, and other exciting species too numerous to describe here, scattered about in this high wild garden. The mountain sorrel, alpine

willow-herb and diminutive spreading stonecrop were new ones for my collection.

Finally, much too soon, the time came to come down out of the mountains and leave our little Youngs Valley world in the care of the lucky wild things that live up there.

But nothing short of universal calamity will prevent us from meeting again in the same old mountain-hemmed flower garden and carrying on from where we were reluctantly forced by time and other demands to cease and desist for the time being.



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