

OUR COMIC SECTION

In a Stupor



Lower California Islands



Cliffs of a Lower California Island.

(Prepared by the National Geographic Society, Washington, D. C.)

THE Islands off the west coast of Lower California are widely scattered over a section of the ocean which provides a very scant rainfall. As a consequence, desert conditions prevail among them. The most interesting of these islands is Guadalupe. It rises precipitously from abyssal depths, a volcano some 12,000 feet high but with only 1,500 feet above the sea. It has never been connected with other shores and it is, therefore, an oceanic island in every respect. All of its animals and plants have come to it either over or through the ocean.

This enforced isolation of the species which come to Guadalupe has caused them to become modified into many distinct forms which are of great interest to students of biology. But, aside from this "esthetic" value, the island has been of very considerable commercial importance because of the great abundance there at one time of certain species of marine mammals.

Guadalupe is the sole remaining home of the only remnant of a herd of elephant seals in the northern hemisphere. Its fine herd of fur seals was hunted and persecuted until apparently the last survivor succumbed to the buckshot of the hunters. At least 200,000 skins of this valuable fur-bearing, which, at present prices, would be worth more than \$4,000,000, were taken from the island.

Guadalupe, Mexico's westernmost possession, located 180 miles southwest of San Diego, Calif., is about 20 miles long and six miles wide. It is known to have been visited by fur-seal hunters in the early part of the Nineteenth century.

The world's greatest herds of fur seals have been so long commercially extinct that people have come to associate the name only with the species which resorts to the Pribilof Islands, in Alaska, where, by long and bitter fighting of diplomatic and legislative battles, the United States has been successful in preserving the largest herd now in existence. But once there were several other herds, much larger, in the southern hemisphere.

Fur Seals All Killed.

The species which lived on Guadalupe was akin to those last and not to the Alaskan forms, although the furs were almost equally valuable and brought good profits to the hunters. Guadalupe being such a distant outpost of Mexico, it is doubtful if a single official of that government had the faintest conception of the war of extermination at the time it was taking place.

So far as the available records show, the last living fur seal was seen on Guadalupe in 1892. Since then several expeditions have gone to the island and searched for the animal without success.

Former fur-seal rookeries have been examined with scrupulous care, the areas measured and the number of animals which once hauled out there to rear their young computed.

South Rookery originally contained at least 50,000 fur seals and compared favorably with the major breeding grounds of the Pribilof Islands today. The entire Guadalupe herd must have numbered at least 100,000 animals when it was in its prime.

Without printed records, how do we know this, thirty years after the last of the animals died? They left their own records, which can be read almost as plainly today as if each animal were in its place; and this makes the realization of the facts all the more bitter.

The animals chose the roughest and most rocky shores for their land homes and congregated in large, compact rookeries, in conformance to the habit of fur seals generally. The constant tramping of thousands upon thousands of flippers over the hard blocks and bowlders of lava rock wore them down to the smoothness of polished marble. And there they are today, silent monuments to a helpless

animal which paid dearly for having a skin coveted by man.

The great slaughter of the Guadalupe fur seals took place between 1800 and 1830. The hunters then thought they had killed all the animals, and the island was forgotten for many years; but about 1890 it was rediscovered and several thousand seals were killed in a few succeeding seasons.

Stories are still heard in San Diego of the last killings which took place. The fur-bearers were pursued into the dark recesses of volcanic beach caves and shot or clubbed by the light of torches.

The Elephant Seal.

Another interesting sea animal is the Guadalupe elephant seal—a huge, clumsy beast with a long flexible trunk. The animals were at one time widely distributed and abundant on many of the remote islands of the Antarctic region, but the whalers soon learned that a fair quantity and quality of oil could be obtained from each carcass. So the slaughter began, and ended only when the species was commercially exterminated.

The animal found on Guadalupe is similar to, but not the same species as that of southern waters, but it suffered equally from the attacks of the whalers.

More than once it was thought that the last living representative of the species had been killed; but fate has dealt more favorably with it than with the fur seals; each time a few new ones escaped to rebuild the herd.

These animals still frequent the original elephant seal beach, a slight indentation of the northwest shoreline of Guadalupe, where precipitous, unscalable cliffs wall in the beach on the back.

Even without the fur seals and elephant seals, Guadalupe would be one of the most interesting islands of the western hemisphere. The sea has eaten its way into the volcanic materials of which it is composed, and exposed the very hearts of some of the craters. One needs but to walk along close to shore and examine the great dike systems, caverns, lava babbles, and vents to gain an idea of the tremendous dynamic forces which were once at work here.

The first naturalist to visit Guadalupe was Dr. Edward Palmer, in 1875. He camped in one of the cypress groves and described the place as a paradise. There were a great many beautiful shrubs and flowering plants in the moisture belt, and the birds were so abundant and so tame that he called it an Isle of Dreams.

Devastated by Goats.

But conditions are vastly changed now. Guadalupe is a biological slaughterhouse.

The shrubs and flowering plants have been practically exterminated and for thirty years no young trees have had a chance to grow. Fortunately, specimens of the pines, palms, and cypresses have been brought to California and planted in some of the parks. The oaks, which apparently have been neglected, are said to have the largest acorns in existence, being fully two inches in diameter.

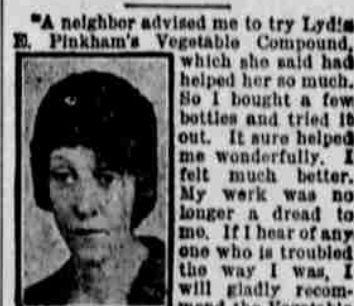
The old trees are fast disappearing through natural death and the effects of storms. Four of the fine species of birds have become extinct and the others are reduced to a fraction of their former number.

The cause of all this death and destruction was the ambition of some one to start a goat ranch on Guadalupe many years ago. The animals, without care, thrived beyond the wildest expectations of the promoters, but the venture proved a failure financially.

The goats have learned to quench their thirst with sea water and have eaten almost every living plant. In seasons of exceptional drought, when nothing grows on the lowlands, thousands upon thousands of the animals have died, and the canyons, beaches and caverns are strewn with their bleached bones.

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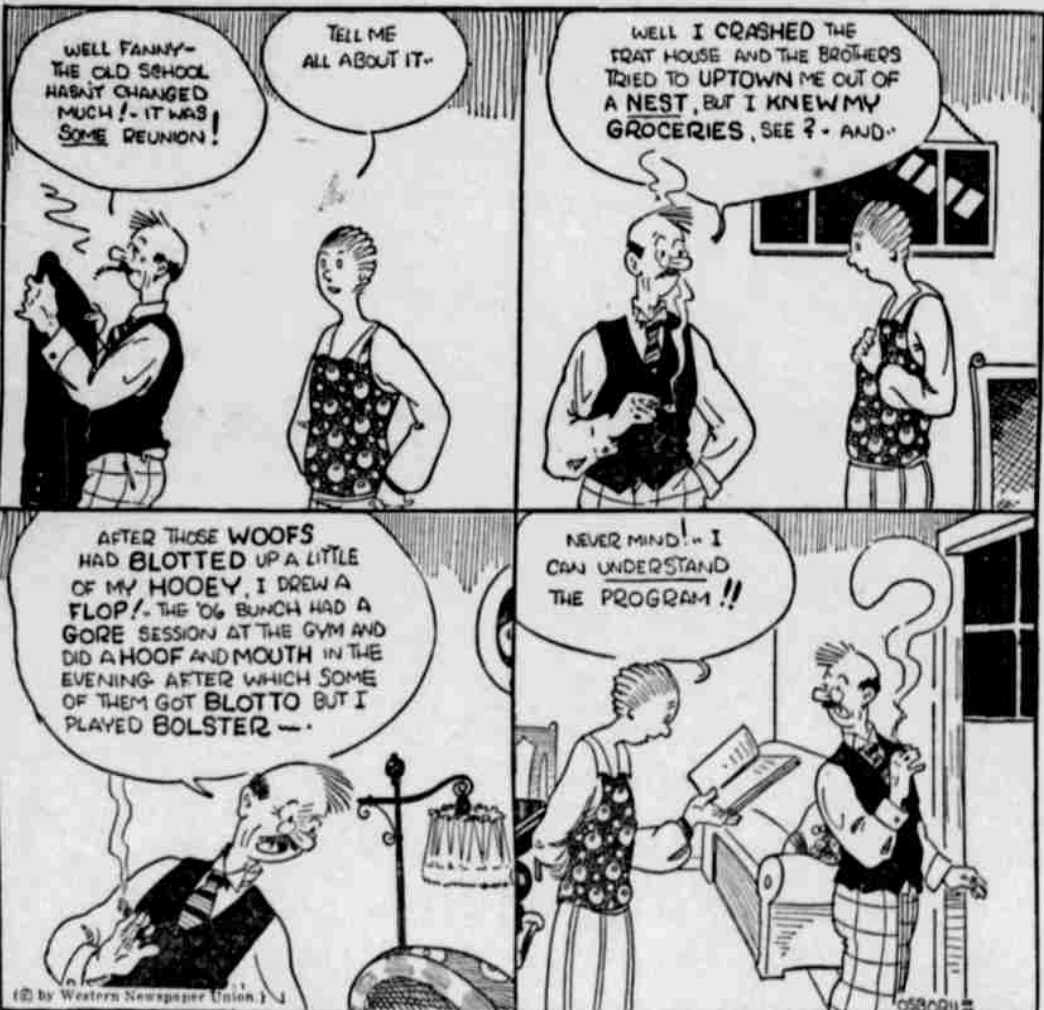
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