

**WILD LIFE IN CALIFORNIA:  
SOME OF ITS BIRDS,  
ANIMALS AND FLOWERS**

Published @ 2017 Trieste Publishing Pty Ltd

ISBN 9780649526697

Wild Life in California: Some of Its Birds, Animals and Flowers by Frank A. Leach

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Cover @ 2017

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*Leach*

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: : AND FLOWERS : :

BY  
FRANK A. LEACH

UNIV. OF  
CALIFORNIA

# WILD LIFE IN CALIFORNIA

SOME OF ITS

BIRDS, ANIMALS AND FLOWERS



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FRANK A. LEACH

OAKLAND, CALIFORNIA

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TRIBUNE PUBLISHING COMPANY

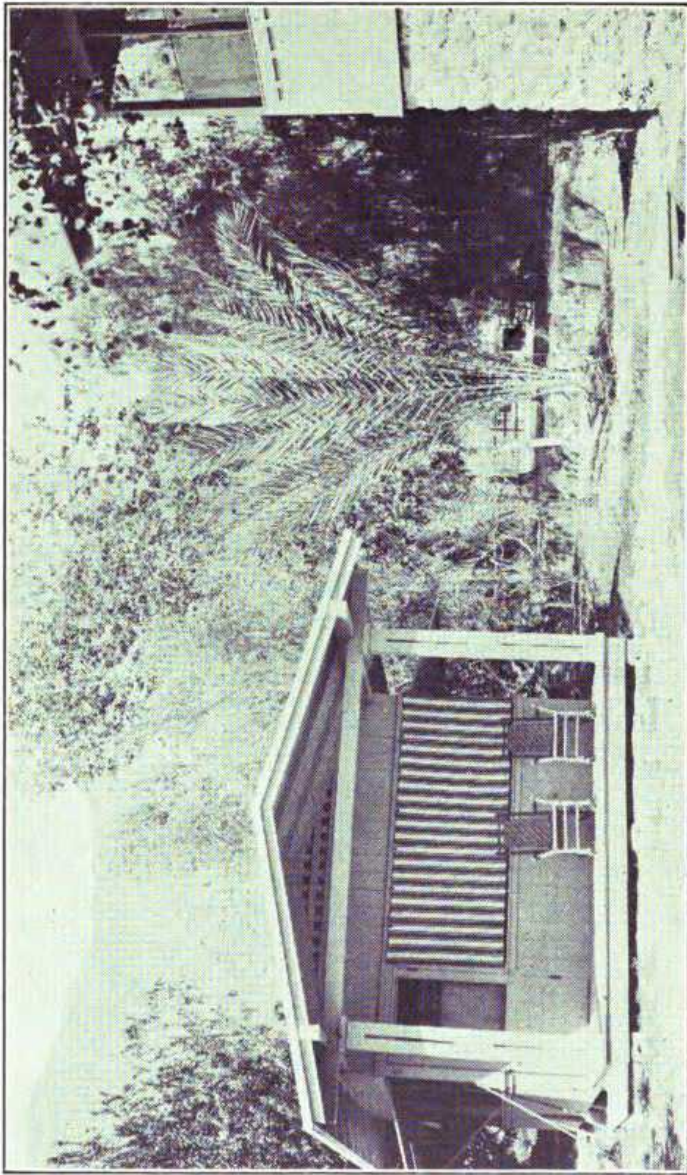
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## FOREWORD

The series of Nature Studies contained herein were published first in The Oakland TRIBUNE. When it was learned that Mr. Leach had set down the results of his many years of observations of California's wild life, The TRIBUNE at once requested the privilege of placing them before its readers. The sound judgment of this has been more than confirmed by the testimonials of delight and benefit from the readers.

Mr. Leach has produced something which any naturalist or lover of the open places would be proud to call his own. He has written with charm, simplicity, knowledge and a literary finish which give his studies an uplifting quality, for both old and young folk.

FREDERICK FAULKNER.



THE AUTHOR'S QUARTERS WHILE IN PALM SPRINGS.



# Wild Life in California

By FRANK A. LEACH

## CHAPTER I

### THE DESERT OF SOUTHERN CALIFORNIA

Its Wonders. Its Wild Life. Its Beauties and Dangers  
The Hermit of Palm Canyon

One evening in the middle of March, my son Ed, his wife and little daughter, Virginia, and self left our home in Piedmont for the Sixteenth street depot, Oakland, preliminary to a visit to Palm Springs, Riverside county, in Southern California.

We checked our baggage to Whitewater, the railroad end of the trip, and boarded the train which was to take us to Los Angeles.

After getting located in our reservations and settling with the conductors for the night I thought I would go into the buffet car, smoke and read until bedtime. The car was crowded. The only vacant seat brought me next to a party of politicians who were having one of those "talks" so much enjoyed and so commonly indulged in when two or more kindred souls, who think it their destiny on this earth to make and unmake statesmen, meet with a little time on their hands, to spare. They were all men well known in the State by their activities in politics, who would not feel complimented to be styled politicians, for they were not, in the offensive sense of the term. They did not recognize the writer, for which I was thankful, as I was now glad to escape becoming involved in discussions of matters that no longer interested me more than becomes an ordinary citizen. They talked rather loudly, I could not help hearing every word said. I could not move away, for there was no other vacant seat in the car. I tried to read. I did turn over several pages of my book, every one of which I read and reread, but when conversation turned upon men that I knew quite well and others that were intimate friends it was difficult to follow the lines in more than a mechanical way. After finishing my smoke I concluded to go to bed and read where I would not be an unwilling listener to the conversation of others and there would be no one to disturb me. When I went to my car and threw open the curtains to my berth, to my astonishment there was a big fat man apparently sound asleep in the bed. I quietly closed the curtains and went to the porter at the other end of the car and asked for an explanation. He didn't

know anything about it and seemed to care less, but finally said he would call the conductor. This official looked at my ticket and said the berth was mine and that the man had no business there. He called a couple of brakemen and the three men went to the berth, I supposed with the purpose of ejecting the intruder. Whether the job, considering the size of the man, or for some other reason, looked to be too great an undertaking, I did not learn. However it was, in a short time the conductor came to me and asked if I would not take another lower berth, which of course was all the same to me, so I consented. He said some complimentary things about the other fellow, but did not offer any explanation of why he let him remain in the berth, though he said the man knew he had no right there.

I could not help but notice the great influence over the manners and civility of grown people wrought by the actions and speeches of a bright, innocent, sweet little thing like Virginia. The conductors and brakemen, who are generally short, if not gruff, and porters who are stolid, largely made so by constant contact with unreasonable and inconsiderate travelers, were all smiles and ready to surrender everything when in the presence of that dear little girl.

After a stop in Los Angeles we boarded another train which was to convey us to Whitewater, situated about nine miles from Palm Springs. This little town is located on that part of desert lying between the San Bernardino and San Jacinto ranges of mountains in the extreme southerly part of California. This particular part of the desert is that portion of the great Colorado Desert that extends into the State of California. Palm Springs is a little town of about forty or fifty houses, including a school, church, hotels, stores and garages.

Our train took us out through the famous San Gabriel Valley, passing Pomona, Ontario, Colton, Beaumont, Banning and several other towns of lesser importance. For the distance of ten or fifteen miles from Los Angeles the

land seemed to be under a high state of cultivation or "intensified farming." Beyond to Banning orchards, grain and hayfields predominated in the use of the land adjacent to the railroad, about all of which appeared to be in a fairly prosperous condition.

Leaving Banning we passed into the desert. The desert is not without vegetation. In fact it is covered with shrubs, plants and cactus, with here and there growths of Palo Verde and smoke trees and palms. Probably seventy-five per cent of all is a shrub that grows from two to possibly ten feet in height, called the Creosote Bush or *Larrea Mexicana*. It is an evergreen and at that time was covered with small yellow flowers. It is a resinous shrub and emits something of a creosote, or carbolic acid smell, which we noted while tramping through it, for sometime before we learned from what it emanated. It is said that in certain localities on the desert the branches of the shrub become incrustated with a gum-like substance identical with the shellac imported from the Orient, and that it is used by the Indians for cementing purposes. The leaves and young branches are said to possess medicinal virtues.

The next most common plant is a perennial ordinarily with leaves of the dusty miller gray shade. The plant rarely grows more than eighteen inches high and generally covers a space of from two to three feet in circumference. From this area hundreds of naked green stems are sent up, surmounted with yellow composite flowers of about an inch or more in diameter. The disk or center, as well as the rays, are bright yellow. We saw a few plants where the centers of the flower were dark brown, and in Chino Canyon, 2000 feet above the desert, we found many of these plants where the leaves instead of being gray were green.

There are a few other gray plants, among which is a species of Yerba Santa, with a violet flower. These plants, however, are not as common as the first mentioned.

Next to the yellow flowered gray plant in importance as to quantity is the cactus family. We noted five varieties, all of which were in bloom, giving by far the most beautiful of all the blossoms we saw on the desert. Some of the cactus bore red flowers, some showy pink blossoms, and others yellow.

At Whitewater an auto stage meets passengers, bound for Palm Springs, so at this point we left the train and were soon on the way to the springs. The road in sections was in fine condition. Being State highway it had been paved, but flood waters had damaged and washed it out in places.

Palm Springs is an oasis of the desert, but not naturally so. Thirty years or more ago somebody conceived the idea of creating a town or city on the spot. The land was acquired and surveyed into blocks and streets, with lots of 27½ feet frontage. Water from a neighboring canyon was brought to the site and improvements in the way of buildings and the planting of trees was begun. We were told that the lots were sold rapidly and that one day's sales amounted to over one

hundred and seventy thousand dollars. Probably the reason for locating the proposed city at the spot was due to the presence there of an immense hot spring. Another enthusiastic person located a place about three miles further south where there now is a small grove of palm trees growing, at which he erected a hotel, beautified the grounds and called it the Garden of Eden. He constructed a narrow gauge railroad to connect the Garden of Eden with the Southern Pacific railroad, running the tracks to Palm Springs station on the latter road. Nothing is left of the enterprise now but the grove of palm trees. It failed for the lack of patronage, but that was before the day of automobiles and great increase of population in the southern part of the State.

The immense hot spring just mentioned was curbed and made to supply water for the bathhouse that was erected, and a small hotel was built. Some of the adjoining lands were planted out in vineyard and to fruit, principally citrus, but in a small way. All grew most luxuriantly. For many years there was not sufficient patronage to justify keeping the hotel open. It fell into other hands and now with the beautiful grounds is a private home.

The advent of the touring autos and the greater population in neighboring cities brought about a change. The charm of this beauty spot on the desert with its salubrious winter climate became known to the people of Los Angeles, Pasadena, San Diego and other cities of the south, and now the trouble is to take care of all who wish to visit the place.

The area of land that was reclaimed from the conditions of the desert probably would not greatly exceed fifty acres. The trees that were planted upon the land have reached maturity. The fresh bright green of the citrus trees, the great spread of the thrifty fig trees, the shade of the great cottonwoods, acres of green meadows and green lawns about the hotel and private grounds, would be features of attraction almost anywhere, but here the contrast with the desert is so great that the springs not only appear as a place of beauty, but a delightful haven of rest and retreat.

Excepting the territory just described and some railroad grant possessions, the desert land thereabouts has been made an Indian reservation. A number of Indians have large holdings under cultivation. Within recent years the government has been encouraging them to plant orchards on quite an extensive scale, aiding them in the purchase of trees and bringing water from the adjacent mountain through the establishment of a system of irrigating ditches.

These ditches are rock lined and cemented so as to insure as little loss of water as possible. Several of the Indians are graduates of the well-known school near Riverside. All the Indians we saw appeared to have abandoned the habits and customs of their forefathers. There were no loafers wrapped in blankets or shawls hanging around the

streets or other places where white people congregate, as was common a few years ago. The men now were as fully occupied with business affairs and as active as their white neighbors.

Their wives were at home attending to household duties, and some of the children were in attendance at the public school. And what is more to their credit the school teacher told me that their children were as bright and as quick to learn as the white children.

In describing the location of Palm Springs I should have mentioned the fact that it is situated on the edge or western side of the desert, at the foot of the San Jacinto range of mountains. In fact the shadow of the high San Jacinto peak is thrown over the town comparatively early in the afternoon as the setting sun drops behind the summit. This mountain is nearly eleven thousand feet high, with several neighboring peaks reaching six to eight thousand feet of elevation. Palm Springs has an elevation of about 500 feet above sea level, but the grade of the desert toward the south drops rapidly and at a distance of fifteen miles, or at Indio, the floor of the valley is twenty-two feet below the sea level, and at a distance of fifty-seven miles further on, at Salton, the floor of the valley is over two hundred and sixty feet below.

Like all other mountain ranges, the sides of San Jacinto range overshadowing Palm Springs are gashed with canyons. Some are insignificant, but many are deep and can be followed back into the mountains for miles. Three miles north of the springs is the entrance of Chino Canyon. Six miles south is the entrance of Palm Canyon. Between the last named and the springs are several other canyons, the principal ones being Murray, Andreas and Tahquitz. The latter is located only a mile and a half from the springs. Andreas four miles and Murray five. Tahquitz has a beautiful waterfall made accessible by an easy trail.

The features of interest in Palm Canyon is the growth there of numerous native palm trees known in botanical circles as the *Washingtonia filifera*. A few of these trees are found in the other canyons previously mentioned, excepting in Tahquitz. They also appear in one other canyon north of Chino, and in several other canyons south of Palm Canyon. They are more numerous on the opposite side of the desert or along the base of the San Bernardino range. The maximum height of the trees is about seventy-five feet, the largest trees have a trunk diameter of about three feet. The huge fan-like leaves thrust from the top of the trees give a pleasing shade. As the trunk ascends in growth the leaves die and hang down, making a thick thatch around the trunk, suggestive of a great petticoat. But it is only occasionally you will find a large tree with its petticoat preserved. Fires, intentional or accidental, have burned them off. Unless the fires burn into the top, or green part, which seldom happens, the trees are uninjured. It is said these trees are peculiar to that section of country ex-

tending from the margins of the northern part of the Colorado desert into Lower California. They are commonly called California fan palms.

We made the hotel, or inn, as it is most commonly called, our headquarters. It is centrally situated in the territory that we wished to cover in our study of nature's productions. So it was from this point we made daily excursions out on the desert and to the various canyons mentioned. Generally we took our lunches with us and would walk from six to fifteen miles. Some of the places, the larger canyons in particular, we visited several times to enable us to observe all of the features of interest, such as the geological formations and recent changes therein, the flora peculiar to the section, and especially some of the desert insect life.

The remarkable vigorous growth of the numerous citrus trees, the strong and healthy appearance of the fig and numerous other fruit, shade and ornamental trees in and about the little town suggested a soil condition of unusual fertility. In the hotel grounds there were growing many beautiful trees of different kinds, among which were a couple of trees near the office bearing grape fruit. These trees were about twenty feet in height and the great size of the fruit hanging from the branches at once attracted the attention of all incoming guests. Some of the largest fruit measured within a fraction of twenty-four inches in circumference, which would give them about eight inches diameter.

We had not been long in the place before we noted that it was teeming with bird life, with numerous songsters. In fact the air was filled with bird music, in which the singing of the linnets and Bullock orioles was the most prominent. The last named was one of the most numerous birds around the springs grounds. As the nesting season was now on we found several pairs of these birds at work constructing the peculiar hanging nests for which they are noted on the under side of the big leaves of the palm trees.

A few moments' walking northerly, easterly or southerly would take a person beyond the lands reclaimed for town purposes, out among the shrubs, cactus and wild flowers of the desert. The floor of the desert consists of what might be roughly called coarse sand, but properly speaking it is composed of the erosions from the granite masses forming the mountains bordering the desert. In the course of time where it receives an abundance of water and some humus, and is worked, it seems to slowly decompose and form soil. It should be rich in some of the elements nutritive to plant life, especially potash. Ordinary sand is composed almost wholly of silica, which is insoluble and therefore differs from the so-called sand of the desert.

As you approach the mouths of the canyons from the main level of the desert this sand becomes coarser and coarser until finally you begin to encounter boulders, then big broken