



# The Shooting Star

SIERRA FOOTHILLS CHAPTER

CALIFORNIA NATIVE PLANT SOCIETY

DECEMBER 2020

## *A View from the Outermost House*

Editor's note: Henry Beston's book *The Outermost House*, first published in 1928, is still in print. This book made a big impression on Rachel Carson – on account of its content and Beston's beautiful writing style. For that reason alone, I decided to order it and read it. I loved the book, and warmly recommend it to you (even though plants make up a small part of the story). This is how Beston ends his book:

“And what of Nature itself, you say – that callous and cruel engine, red in tooth and fang? Well, it is not so much of an engine as you think. As for ‘red in tooth and fang,’ whenever I hear the phrase or its intellectual echoes I know that some passer-by has been getting his life from books. It is true that there are grim arrangements. Beware of judging them by whatever human values are in style. As well expect Nature to answer to your human values as to come into your house and sit in a chair. The economy of nature, its checks and balances, its measurements of competing life – all this is its great marvel and has an ethic of its own. Live in Nature, and you will soon see that for all its non-human rhythm, it is no cave of pain. As I write I think of my beloved birds of the great beach, and of their beauty and their zest of living. If there are fears, know also that Nature has its unexpected and unappreciated mercies.

“Whatever attitude to human existence you fashion for yourself, know that it is valid only if it be the shadow of an attitude to Nature. A human life, so often likened to a spectacle upon a stage, is more justly a ritual. The ancient values of dignity, beauty, and poetry which sustain it are of Nature's inspiration; they are born of the mystery and beauty of the world. Do no dishonour to the earth lest you dishonour the spirit of man. Hold your hands out over the earth as over a flame. To all who love her, who open to her the doors of their veins, she gives of her strength, sustaining them with her own measureless tremor of dark life. Touch the earth, love the earth, honour the earth, her plains, her valleys, her hills, and her seas; rest your spirit in her solitary places. For the gifts of life are the earth's and they are given to all, and they are the songs of birds at daybreak, Orion and the Bear, and dawn seen over the ocean from the beach.”

## *In this issue...*

- On p. 2, Melissa Booher (Membership Coordinator) and Doug Krajnovich (Newsletter editor) issue a reminder for everyone to please log on to the CNPS website to check the e-mail settings in your profile.
- On p. 3, Barry Breckling shares his thoughts on Hollywood – also known as Toyon or Christmas Berry.
- On pp. 4-5, Shelly Davis-King shares an article on Indian Manzanita and its native uses, complete with references.
- On p. 6, your editor shares an “unexpected mercy” that he experienced in Yosemite, accompanied by another quote from Henry Beston.

If you change your mailing or e-mail address, please inform Melissa Booher ([ellenbooher@gmail.com](mailto:ellenbooher@gmail.com)) and/or the CNPS state organization in Sacramento so that the change(s) get recorded.

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*Dedicated to the Preservation of  
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## PLEASE TAKE A FEW MINUTES TO CHECK AND UPDATE YOUR CNPS PROFILE

We are in the process of updating our e-mail list for the first time in many months. Many people have joined since our last refresh, and many others have departed, but we have a problem:

***Many people that are active in our chapter – including several field trip leaders and a current board member – have their profiles set such that we are not supposed to be sending them any e-mails – not even the Newsletter.***

Melissa recently sent e-mails to the various affected groups with more detailed instructions on what to do if you want to stay on the e-Shooting Star mailing list. The screen shot at the bottom of this page shows the two boxes that need to be checked if you want to stay on the mailing list.

If you are a lapsed member, or even if you have never been a dues-paying member of CNPS, we will be happy to keep you on our mailing list, but you need to give Melissa written permission (e-mail is fine).

This December issue was sent to everyone on the old and new e-mail lists. Starting January 2021, we will only use the new list.

Old newsletters are archived on our chapter website. You can always look there if you have been dropped from the e-mail list. The website link appears at the bottom right corner of p. 1 of every Newsletter. Contact info for all board members is given on the last page of every newsletter. We strive to keep this information up-to-date.

Sincerely,  
Melissa Booher (Membership Coordinator)  
Doug Krajnovich (Newsletter editor)

Personal Profile | **Interests and Subscriptions** ← be sure to check both tabs

### Email Interests

Descr

- CNPS Plant Science Training Workshop Announcements
- CNPS Rare Plant Treasure Hunt Updates
- California Native Plant Society News (gardening tips, conservation, plant science, and more)
- Conservation Action Alerts
- IPA Workshop Data Gathering & Review (by invitation only)
- Local Chapter News (garden tours, plant sales, field trips, volunteer opportunities, and more)

If you check *both* of these boxes, we are allowed to send you the e-Shooting Star Newsletter and other chapter announcements.

### Email Preferences

Yes, I would like to receive email from California Native Plant Society.

Deselect to unsubscribe from all CNPS emails.

## *Hollywood*

Barry Breckling

Hollywood is a common shrub or small tree that grows in southern Oregon, down through California, and into northern Mexico. It's common in the hills surrounding Los Angeles, particularly in a bustling little community northwest of downtown L.A. – Hollywood. In many places the plant is better known as toyon or Christmas Berry. The plants resemble holly, with their prickly-edged, smooth, evergreen leaves and their bright red berries, which become ripe in the winter and are often used for holiday wreaths and other festive décor. In the early 1900s, collecting toyon for Christmas decorations became so widespread that a law was passed making it illegal to pick toyon on public lands and on private land without the owner's permission.

American Robins, Cedar Waxwings, and other birds devour the berries, and the berries are also eaten by coyotes, bears, foxes, and wood rats. The fact lots of other animals eat the berries without ill effect might tempt you to use them as a convenient trail-side snack. Best to resist. The seeds inside the berries contain cyanide, which is highly toxic to humans. As the berries ripen, they lose some of their toxicity, but they'd still be likely to make you feel sick. Native Americans dried and cooked the berries to make them edible.

If you decided to grow toyon and planted their seeds in the winter, the next spring all you'd have is a collection of dead seeds. Many years ago, on my commute to college, I noticed what looked like a large toyon orchard, with plants growing in long, straight, tidy rows. I couldn't imagine why someone would grow so many toyon plants, maybe to make Christmas wreaths? My curiosity began to grow. Then one morning, having a little spare time, I stopped at the "orchard" one morning to get a better look. The plants were growing below staked wires that stretched across the field; it was a long-abandoned vineyard. Then I noticed that several robins with bulging bellies were perched on the wires, and I surmised that their bellies were full of toyon berries. Later, after a bit of research, I learned that toyon seeds must be scarified before they can become viable, in this case by the acid in the stomach of birds. What an effective method to get your seeds dispersed.

The name toyon comes from the Spanish interpretation of the Ohlone word for the plant totton, Ohlone being the Native American group that inhabited the San Francisco and Monterey bay areas. The scientific name of the plant is *Heteromeles arbutifolia*. *Heteromeles* means different apple, for the miniature, apple-like berries, and *arbutifolia* means having leaves like *Arbutus unedo*, the Spanish madrone.



(© Barry Breckling)

## A Brief Note on Indian Manzanita (*Arctostaphylos mewukka*)

Shelly Davis-King

November 2020

Recently while conducting an ethnobotanical survey of the main stem Stanislaus River with local Me-Wuk elders, we were surprised to find gigantic fruit on one species of manzanita, and began investigation into what it might be. The Native Americans were as surprised as I to observe two-cm diameter berries, rich with sparkling sugars! We were also astonished to discover that this is a relatively common, but infrequently mentioned species of manzanita first described by the biologist C. Hart Merriam in 1918. In his article, "Two New Species of Manzanitas from the Sierra Nevada of California," Merriam introduced the botanical world to the Me-Wuk and Nisenan (Nissenan\*) varieties of *Arctostaphylos*.

Clinton Hart Merriam, born in 1855, was, at the age of 16, appointed as naturalist of the Hayden Geological Survey of 1872 and began his study of birds especially. His interest in ornithology continued, but at the age of 18 he enrolled at university to train as a physician, graduating with his M.D. from Columbia University in 1879. Although successful in medicine, his interest in birds and animals was more compelling and by 1885 he was Chief Ornithologist in the Division of Entomology of the Department of Agriculture, which soon expanded to include mammalogy in the new federal bureau predecessor to the US Fish and Wildlife Service. His name became synonymous with the Bureau of Biological Survey, and with the "life zone" concept he pioneered (Merriam 1898). He also inaugurated the North American Fauna series, describing and naming 71 new species and several new genera of mammals in a few short years (Grinnell 1943). Merriam was founder, with other 32 other luminaries, of the National Geographic Society.

Merriam was leader of the 1891 Death Valley Expedition, which he followed in 1899 with the two-month long exploratory voyage of the Alaskan coastline, funded by E. H. Harriman. About 1900, he began devoting most of his time to the study of California Indians, and by the end of the first decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century he had switched completely to being an ethnographer. Although not a particularly stringent linguist, Merriam collected number and word lists, perhaps thinking that he would be able to classify various Indian groups based on their linguistic differences, similar to his numerous biological taxonomies. His early interest in plants and animals prompted the private Harriman Fund to underwrite Merriam's research for the rest of his life.

Merriam conducted some of the earlier ethnographic accounts of the Sierra Nevada Indians, particularly the Me-Wuk and South Maidu, visiting their camps and homes and describing their uses of plants, animals, food items, and more in his California journals (Merriam 1898-1938). Merriam had a keen interest in the manzanitas of Tuolumne and Mariposa counties, and soon recognized the *mewukka* variety, noting that next to acorn, manzanita berries were second in importance for vegetable foods to the Indians. His field notes show a distinct erasure of *viscida* and replacement with the term *mewukka*, even prior to his formal naming of the species (Merriam 1918). Formal naming took place after he gathered and analyzed specimens from Bald Rock (where Twain Harte Lake dam is located), at Basin Creek (North Fork Tuolumne River), and Priest Hill on Priest Grade. Yosemite Miwok call this species *Muk'-ko*, while the *A. mariposa* (now *A. viscida* ssp. *mariposa*) they call A'yeh. The Indians saw a clear distinction between the two species, punctuated by the two different names. There is even today some dispute among botanists as to its authentic position as a separate species, with some who maintain that Mewuk manzanita is a stable hybrid of *A. viscida* and *A. patula*.

(cont'd. on next page)

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\* Merriam misspelled the word for the Southern Maidu, Nisenan, using two esses instead of one, and transferred that error to the species name.

### (Indian Manzanita, cont'd. from previous page)

The naming of the two new manzanitas of the Sierra Nevada, *A. mewukka* and *A. nissenana*, was in honor of the Native people with whom Merriam worked. Merriam purposefully named the species based on the way William Fuller, the captain of the Tuolumne Me-Wuk, spelled it. He did not spell it like the people of Yosemite (Miwok) or the people of Calaveras (Mi-Wuk) or the people of the Plains (Miwuk). Me-Wuk is distinctively Tuolumne. Manzanita berries were a staple of the Me-Wuk pantry, and were favored as the fruit of a refreshing and Vitamin C-rich cider. Additionally, cider was used as a nonalcoholic aperitif or digestif to whet the appetite, or as a tonic for upset stomachs (Barrett and Gifford 1933:161–162). Berries hold very well in dried form and are sucked upon to get the meat off the seeds or may also be reconstituted for use in cider. Further, the berries might be used for stomach cramps.

*Mewukka* manzanita is one example of the numerous plants found along the Stanislaus River and elsewhere, still prized by the Me-Wuk today for their beauty and use. Look for this manzanita in the Ponderosa Pine Belt especially at Lyons Reservoir, along Priest Grade Road, in the Twain Harte and Sugar Pine areas, at Basin Creek on the North Fork Tuolumne River, in the Merced River canyon, and in places where *Chamaebatia foliolosa* (*kitkitdizze*, a Me-Wuk word) and *Frangula californica* ssp. *tomentella* are common. North of Tuolumne County, in the Sierra, *mewukka* is often found where *Ceanothus prostrates* (pinemat) grows. *Mewukka* may grow to be six feet tall, and the large berry looks a little like those of *A. patula*, containing a central stone surrounded by thick pulp.

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## *Unexpected mercies*

Doug Krajnovich

2020 has been quite the year. I, for one, am not sorry to see it go. Between the pandemic, the politics, the field trip cancellations, park closures, – then another round of horrific wildfires and off-the-chart AQI readings, – it required conscious effort to maintain even a semblance of positivity. My retirement plan was to visit Yosemite at least once a month, and I stuck to my plan until this year. One area of the park that I had always wanted to visit, but never gotten to, was Vogelsang. In October, I secured a wilderness permit for the Vogelsang area, bracing myself for cold nights and poor air quality. I did not expect to see anything blooming above 10 kft in mid-October, but I stumbled upon one specimen of Red Mountain Heather near Fletcher Lake that was still in bloom. I feel a special sympathy for the first and last wildflowers of the season – the *pioneers* and the *never-give-ups*.

The sky was crystal clear – no smoke, no haze, not even a cloud. Since it did not drop below freezing on night #1, I decided to sleep under the stars on night #2, which I spent at Ireland Lake. The night sky was the best that I have ever witnessed in Yosemite. I punctuated my sleep with three long star-gazing sessions. After I got home, I compared what I saw to the Stellarium On-line Star Map – <https://stellarium-web.org>. The attached map corresponds to the end of my first star-gazing session.

Below the map, another wonderful quote from Henry Beston's *The Outermost House*.



**“Night is very beautiful on this great beach. It is the true other half of the day’s tremendous wheel; no lights without meaning stab or trouble it; it is beauty, it is fulfillment, it is rest.”**

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