

# Sierra Sounds

By Blanche Stallings

**S**ierra sounds! What does that make you think of? Sierra sounds! Well, to get started, we might consider water sounds. Water just can't move about without making pleasant sounds—and what a chance to move about it has in the Sierra! Down, down, down go the streams large and small, making those delightful sounds that only streams can make. And oh, the lovely sound of water lapping in a lake!

And speaking of things moving about, the wind gets around over the Sierra too, and of course it makes its own inimitable sounds. Up and down chimneys and couloirs and canyons, and over the peaks and the passes; across grassy meadows, and clean slopes of granite; but when it gets into the pine trees—oh, surely one of the best sounds in all the whole world is the sound of the wind in the pine trees.

And do you remember something like this? It's a high granite place, above canyons and shadows, but still not exactly a summit. There are a few pine trees scattered about, and some flowers and grass in the cracks. Otherwise, everything is just crystal-clear air, and sunlight, and blue sky, and space. Then comes the little wind, gentle, gay, and reassuring. It touches the shining needles and there's the slightest breath of pine-sound; and it blows across the grass and there's the faintest swish of grass-sound. It's not a heavy stream of sound; just fragmentary whiffs of it.

Next, by way of contrast, how about some thunder? Ah, there's a grand, satisfying Sierra sound! Isn't it exciting the way everything is very still! Then up above the jagged peaks a tremendous crack, crash, boom; then down along the canyons all the rumbling and billowing and rumbling. Then again the stillness, and finally the rain. Maybe there'll be only a few drops, maybe just enough to make some water diamonds and "settle the dust on the trail," maybe—but to get back to the sounds.

Bird songs are an important Sierra sound. Someone has written of the cheering and comforting song of a white-crowned sparrow in the cold darkness of the Sierra night. I remember especially the clear musical notes of the hermit thrush in the warm brightness of the Sierra day. The setting is not too definite—just a general combination of fresh mountain air, unbelievably-blue sky, shining-needled pine trees, grassy open stretches, sunlight and shadows; of lying on the ground half asleep and half awake; and through it all, scattered at exquisitely satisfying intervals, the recurring song of the hermit thrush.

And now we might think about another kind of Sierra sound. Perhaps it might be called "the sound, or sounds, we make." Any naturalist will tell us that we should go silently if we would see, and no doubt we should. Even so, there are certain sounds that are good to remember. Like packing and unpacking sounds—dropping a dunnage bag on the ground, pulling a bedroll out of it, zipping or unzipping a sleeping bag. Or like tin cup sounds—slipping a cup over a belt, dipping it into the stream for a drink, setting it down on the granite. Like knapsack sounds, and rope sounds, and the sound of bootnails on granite—oh, there's just no end of them. And by the way, how would you like to hear a good yodel off the top of some peak you'd climbed; or a fine, rousing "wolf call" ringing through camp along about daybreak some cold Sierra morning?

No one could go tramping up and down the mountains without acquiring general memories of all these sounds; but probably most of us have very special sound-memories that stand out above the others. I know I have. For instance, in a total of about nineteen weeks in the Sierra there's a certain water-sound that I can definitely remember hearing only twice. It might be described as the sound of cascades and falling water coming from the remotest boundaries of a deep, vast, open silence. There are undoubtedly countless places in the Sierra where this particular water-sound is set in this particular way, yet I can remember consciously hearing, enjoying and appreciating it only twice.

The first time was from the little mountain house at Glacier Point, facing out over the tremendous canyon. It was my introduction to Yosemite. We had driven up there from the South after dark. All around was the stillness of daybreak-to-sunrise on the Point, over the canyon was the stillness of space, and far beyond and below, the sound of falling water. I think it was Vernal and Nevada. The other time was from a point on the Agnew Pass Trail, overlooking the canyon of the Middle Fork of the San Joaquin. I had been stopped at that point by Banner and Ritter. They seemed to express life with such power and authority that I was forced to listen in silence. Again, all around was the wonderful stillness, and beyond the stillness, the sound of cascading water.

While we're on this subject, perhaps we should consider another aspect of Sierra sound, which I notice has crept into these ramblings to quite an extent, namely, the absence of sound. That's one of the attractive features about the Sierra—there's plenty of silence, abundance of silence, all varieties and kinds of silence. There's the stillness of the summit, and the stillness of the forest, the stillness of the dawn, or of a frozen, crag-bound lake. Yes, the more you think about it the more you don't know which is better, the sounds or the silence. But why choose? We have both! That's it— it's the silence itself plus the way there's-enough of silence so that all the sounds that are there have adequate room, a proper setting. Countless enchanting Sierra sounds in the matchless Sierra silence!

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