

Through the Foothills with a Flock of Sheep

by John Muir *from My First Summer in the Sierra*

In 1869, naturalist John Muir was hired by a California sheep owner to accompany the flock and shepherds to a summer pasture in the Sierra Nevada mountains. Muir recorded his adventure in his diary which was published in 1911. This passage is from the beginning of the trip.

June 3, 1869

The home ranch from which we set out is on the south side of the Tuolumne River near French Bar, where the foothills of metamorphic gold-bearing slates dip below the stratified deposits of the Central Valley. We had not gone more than a mile before some of the old leaders of the flock showed by the eager, inquiring way they ran and looked ahead that they were thinking of the high pastures they had enjoyed last summer. Soon the whole flock seemed to be hopefully excited, the mothers calling their lambs, the lambs replying in tones wonderfully human, their fondly quavering calls interrupted now and then by hastily snatched mouthfuls of withered grass. Amid all this seeming babel of baas as they streamed over the hills every mother and child recognized each other's voice. In case a tired lamb, half asleep in the smothering dust, should fail to answer, its mother would come running back through the flock toward the spot whence its last response was heard, and refused to be comforted until she found it, the one of a thousand, though to our eyes and ears all seemed alike.

The flock traveled at the rate of about a mile an hour, outspread in the form of an irregular triangle, about a hundred yards wide at the base, and a hundred and fifty yards long, with a crooked, ever-changing point made up of the strongest foragers, called the "leaders," which, with the most active of those scattered along the ragged sides of the "main body," hastily explored nooks in the rocks and bushes for grass and leaves; the lambs and feeble old mothers dawdling in the rear were called the "tail end."

About noon the heat was hard to bear; the poor sheep panted pitifully and tried to stop in the shade of every tree they came to, while we gazed with eager longing through the dim burning glare toward the snowy mountains and streams, though not one was in sight. The landscape is only wavering foothills roughened here and there with bushes and trees and outcropping masses of slate. The trees, mostly the blue oak (*Quercus Douglasii*), are about thirty to forty feet high, with pale blue-green leaves and white bark, sparsely planted on the thinnest soil or in crevices of rocks beyond the reach of grass fires. The slates in many places rise abruptly through the tawny grass in sharp lichen-covered slabs like tombstones in deserted burying-grounds. With the exception of the oak and four or five species of manzanita and ceanothus, the vegetation of the foothills is mostly the same as that of the plains. I saw this region in the early spring, when it was a charming landscape garden full of birds and bees and flowers. Now the scorching weather makes everything dreary. The ground is full of cracks, lizards glide about on the rocks, and ants in amazing numbers, whose tiny sparks of life only burn the brighter with the heat, fairly quiver

with unquenchable energy as they run in long lines to fight and gather food. How it comes that they do not dry to a crisp in a few seconds' exposure to such sun-fire is marvelous. A few rattlesnakes lie coiled in out-of-the-way places, but are seldom seen. Magpies and crows, usually so noisy, are silent now, standing in mixed flocks on the ground beneath the best shade trees, with bills wide open and wings drooped, too breathless to speak; the quails also are trying to keep in the shade about the few tepid alkaline water-holes; cottontail rabbits are running from shade to shade among the ceanothus brush, and occasionally the long-eared hare is seen cantering gracefully across the wider openings.

Questions

1. What type of figurative language is “babble of baas”?
2. Give two examples from the text that show that the weather was hot and dry.
3. Muir compares the current landscape and animals with his previous visit. List two differences he mentions.
4. What does “dawdling” mean?

Vocabulary List

Each of the vocabulary words below are used in the reading passage. As you read the passage, pay attention to context clues that suggest the word's meaning.

1. Stratified
2. Inquiring
3. Fondly
4. Foragers
5. Hastily
6. Crevices
7. Dreary
8. Seldom

Context Clues

Using context clues from the sentences in the passage, underline the correct meaning of the word in boldface.

1. "...the foothills of metamorphic gold-bearing slates dip below the **stratified** deposits of the Central Valley."

- a. thick b. muddy c. rocky d. layered

2. "We had not gone more than a mile before some of the old leaders of the flock showed by the eager, **inquiring** way they ran..."

- a. confusing b. questioning c. wild d. haphazard

3. "...their **fondly** quavering calls interrupted now and then by hastily snatched mouthfuls of withered grass."

- a. lovingly b. loudly c. muffled d. familiar

4. "... with a crooked, ever-changing point made up of the strongest **foragers**..."

- a. jumpers b. eaters c. hunters d. fighters

5. "... **hastily** explored nooks in the rocks and bushes for grass and leaves..."

- a. curiously b. quickly c. calmly d. sleepily

6. "The trees...with pale blue-green leaves and white bark, sparsely planted on the thinnest soil or in **crevices** of rocks beyond the reach of grass fires."

- a. piles b. holes c. cracks d. arrangements

7. "Now the scorching weather makes everything **dreary**."

- a. dreamy b. exciting c. gloomy d. rainy

8. "A few rattlesnakes lie coiled in out-of-the-way places, but are **seldom** seen."

- a. often b. commonly c. rarely d. never