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LITTLE WHITE-FOOT AND HIS WORLD'S RECORD

by

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If we were searching for the world's record among wild animals, the white-footed or deer mouse would take the mountain-climbing prize above every other North American animal. High up the rugged slopes of Mt. Orizaba in Mexico, Dr. E. W. Nelson saw tiny tracks in the volcanic ashes, the footprints of a little white-footed mouse living at an altitude of about 16,000 feet. This tiny animal had climbed high up on the burnt-out southern volcano beyond the limit of vegetation.

During the summer of 1919 while the Mazamas were camped on the south side of Rainier, various parties made the climb to the summit. One of the guides discovered a little white-footed mouse living in the bleak and barren rocks surrounded by the wastes of unmelted snow on the mountain top.

Scientists are not willing to record such unusual occurrences without positive proof, so the guide killed this little deer mouse among the rocks in the crater. He made an affidavit signed by several men who were present. We got the skin and affidavit from Mr. Roger W. Toll, then Superintendent of Rainier National Park. These are now in the collections of the Biological Survey of the Department of Agriculture.

Putting little white-foot in the archives at Washington is really of small interest in comparison with the story of how he got there, the history of his life and actions if he could have lived.

This little mouse on Mt. Orizaba was higher above sea

level than the one on Mt. Rainier, although he was not nearly as far beyond the limit of vegetation. The top of Rainier is several thousand feet above timberline.

Most people dislike mice, and there is plenty of reason for it. The thieving little house-mouse, like the poor, is always with us. He was once a foreigner that invaded America. In fact, he has encircled the globe, traveling in ships and on inland commercial routes wherever merchandise is carried. He lives in the cabin of the mountaineer, the cottage of the workingman, and the palace of the millionaire.

Little white-foot can be easily distinguished from the common house-mouse which has a uniform color on the back and underneath, and a long hairless tail. White-foot has large bead-like eyes and a long mustache. His body is brown or fawn colored on the back, but his feet and entire under parts, even to the tip of his tail, are white. In the woods he generally makes a home in an old stump or log, or in some crevice. The nest is of grasses, hair, and other soft material. When the opportunity offers, he comes into an old cabin, shed, or even into a house, and in this way he is confused with the imported house-mouse.

As to the occurrence of a white-footed mouse on the top of Rainier, he might have made the journey up there himself, or it might be reasonable to suppose that he went to the top hidden away in the pack-sack of some mountain climber. We were somewhat inclined to this view after spending the night at the rough rock cabin at Camp Muir, the last stopping place for climbers before the final ascent.

I was just beginning to doze when I felt something tickling my face. I opened my eyes and there in the moonlight

sat a little white-footed mouse on the door stone. He started to wash his face, but before he could finish the stillness of the night air was broken by the shrill scream of a woman, ^{inside the cabin.} I knew that a second little mouse had walked across her face. From other loud exclamations, a listener might have thought there was an army of skirmishing mice. Had these mice ventured out of their normal habitat from accidental cause? Had they wandered high up the mountain, led by the distant odor of lunches to establish a permanent home at an altitude of 10,000 feet? If they spent the winter here it would have to be in a state of hibernation.

Later on during the summer, Dr. Walter P. Taylor of the United States Biological Survey, not only saw the white-footed mouse, but also discovered that the western bushy-tailed wood-rat lived here at Camp Muir, perhaps also attracted by the presence of people and lunches. But Dr. Taylor made a discovery that was much more remarkable from a natural history standpoint.

Under the wall of the cabin at Camp Muir, he trapped a large-footed meadow-mouse, an animal that lives on roots and green plant life. Why, then, should this little fellow go several miles beyond timberline or the normal limit of vegetation, making a vertical climb of three thousand feet through the zone of rock-slides, snow-fields, and glaciers? He had ventured so far into the arctic that any naturalist would have said it was impossible for him to live here. Yet in late summer even at this altitude, there was an occasional scattering of alpine flowers and dwarf grasses which might furnish a meal. As near as Dr. Taylor could judge, *Microtus*, the meadow-mouse, was living on some of the lichens that grew on the rocks.

Small animals like mice, squirrels, and chipmunks are perhaps influenced a good deal by the actions of men. From long experience they know that where man is, there also is a supply of food. In seeing men climb to the top of snow-capped mountains, it is not unlikely that some wild animals are led to do the same thing.

The wild folks wander about a good deal more than people think. The wanderlust may come to certain individuals, just as it comes to the human race. Some of them are more adventuresome than others, but the real cause is perhaps the hunting instinct, or the desire to find new sources of food supply, the same propelling force which urges our migratory birds to make their long periodic flights.

One can readily see that, in the struggle for existence among the mice, squirrels, and other small mammals, when there is a favorable season for ripening plants and food is abundant, the crop of little beasts is very large. The following season may bring a smaller harvest of food and the rodent population is forced to scatter in all directions to live. Thus is set up a migrating habit which is really continuous in operation, especially during the warmer and more favorable period of the year.

Little white-foot holds his own because there are so many of him. He has many enemies. Hawks, owls, crows, weasels, minks, foxes, cats, skunks, snakes, and others are always on his trail, yet the mouse population keeps on its even way. If food is abundant, this little wood's pixy may have several families in a single season. As Vernon Bailey says, a new family may appear before the last young are full grown, and the young have their first families before they pass from the immature blue-gray to the fawn-colored adult coat, or when only two or three months old.