

Early Scientific Studies Completed

In the mid 1860's, an expedition for the purpose of assessing the minerals, the flora and the fauna and agricultural potential of the Great Basin was commissioned by Congress. In the Spring of 1867, a party comprising, four Geological Engineers, three Topographic Engineers, a Zoologist, a Botanist, and a photographer named Timothy O'Sullivan, proceeded to California, where they set out for the deserts of Nevada. During that season, the party made assessments while traveling down the Truckee River to Pyramid Lake; along the Carson River, near Fort Churchill; Carson City and thence along the Western reaches of the Humboldt River; ending the season at Unionville. In 1868, their investigations took them cross country from Unionville to Battle Mountain, then south to Austin and Smith Creek, then Easterly along the pony express trail to Fort Ruby. From Fort Ruby, they traveled North through Ruby Valley, Secret Pass, Star Valley and then East along the California trail to Salt Lake City. In 1869, the party covered much of the Northern part of the Wasatch Mountains as far South as Provo Canyon, Utah Lake, Antelope, Stansbury and Carrington Islands and a portion of the Uinta Mountains.

I find it hard to believe that the findings of this expedition have not been well publicized. Perhaps, I, myself, might not have become involved in learning the extent of the party's investigations, if it had not been that on a sunny day in August, 1995, an elderly gentlemen and his wife stopped on the road, where I was retrieving my mail, to learn if I knew of a way, where they could get to the shores of Franklin Lake. (Franklin Lake lies just below our ranch meadows, where my family and I ranch in Ruby Valley)

After introducing ourselves, I learned that Mr. Ketner was the recipient of a grant which had been made for the purpose of reassessing the findings of Robert Ridgway, the Zoologist who had accompanied the King Expedition. Mr. Ketner explained that before coming to Ruby Valley, he had conducted comparison surveys, one near Carson City at Fort Churchill and another at Antelope Island in the Great Salt Lake. When I ask what he was finding, Mr. Ketner said that he was finding the avifauna to be more diverse and abundant than was reported by Robert Ridgway in 1867, 68 and 69.

I remember thinking to myself, I'll bet, if Mr. Ketner's work had produced the opposite result, we would soon be seeing a news release in papers across this Nation telling of the loss of birdlife since settlement. But with the result being what it is, I suspect that we will hear nothing of his findings.

That September, after Mr. Ketner had returned to his home in Arvada, Colorado, he sent me a summary of his work which had been completed to that time. He stated in his letter, "This year we were not able to stay in the Ruby Mountains area anywhere near as long as Ridgway did.

However, we intend to return next year and probably again the following year in order to make the length of time observing birds somewhat comparable to the several weeks that he was in the Area.”

However, Mr. Ketner did not appear the following summer. So, that Fall, I called Mr. Ketner and mentioned that I had missed seeing him that summer. As I suspected, Mr. Ketner informed me that financial problems had arisen, wherein moneys were no longer available for the continuation of the project.

While I was in Reno a year or so later, I made a point of going to the special collections archives at the University of Nevada to obtain a complete copy of Robert Ridgway’s report. While there, I also obtained a copy of Sereno Watson’s report which he had done on the Botany of the region.

Within the text of Mr. Watson’s Report, is the following description of the country as it appeared at the time of the King Expedition.

...the turfing “buffalo” or “grama” grasses, which make the plains east of the Rocky Mountains a vast pasture for the bison, deer, and antelope, are here unknown. There are indeed, various other species more or less abundant in localities, but always growing in sparsely scattered tufts and dying away with the early summer heat, or to be then found only in favored spots in the mountain canyons.

...usurping entire predominance is the “everlasting sagebrush”, the *Artemisia tridentata*. This is by far the most prevalent of all species, covering valleys and foothills in broad stretches farther than the eye can reach...

On the foothills only and not ascending above the base of the mountains *Purshsa Tridenfata* [bitterbrush] is widely distributed...

* * *

For grazing purposes the region is not generally adopted, as is proven by the absence of all graminivorous animals excepting rabbits in the valleys and rarely a few mountain sheep or antelopes in the higher ranges. (Spelling in the original)

When Jedediah Smith, Peter Skeen Ogden and John Fremont first made tracks throughout the West, they found the rivers muddy, the grass poor, and game hard to find. Unfortunately, no one within the agencies or the environmental community seems to want to take the earliest explorers word for it. That is why the findings of Sereno Watson and Robert Ridgway are so

important. These were government scientists, charged with the responsibility of determining the status of the fauna and flora, as it existed at that time. Is it not time that we all recognize that everything has improved since the time of first settlement? Can anyone deny that there are more species of birdlife today than there was back in the days when Peter Skeen Ogden was traveling throughout the Great Basin? Can anyone deny that our rangelands were made better by livestock grazing? Can anyone deny there are greater numbers of big game now than there were in the mid 1900's. I don't think so. But if there are people that disagree, say so, for I would like to pursue the issue further.