

# DESERT NEIGHBORS

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# DESERT NEIGHBORS

by

*Edith M. Patch*

*and*

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*drawings by*

*Carroll Lane Fenton*

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## CHAPTER I

# VISITING A DESERT

WHEN you go to one of the deserts in our country, you may wish to stay for a long visit. When you think about it all afterwards, you may wish to go back—to see the brown mountains again and to take more walks across the reddish-buff sands. You will think how much you would like to become better acquainted with the birds, the little mammals, and the hungry lizards you saw during your first visit. It will be fun to learn more about the creatures that burrow underground. You will wish to see the plants again, too, even though many of them are so prickly that you need to be careful when you are near them.

You will feel that way about it because a desert is not a barren place where nothing—really *nothing*—grows. A few deserts do have bare hills, called dunes, made of sand that moves, or drifts, every time the wind blows. But even between dunes there are valleys where flowers bloom, birds nest, and *Lycosa*, the spider, digs her tunnels. You will expect to meet those spiny plants called cacti (or cactuses); but you may be surprised to find so many shrubs and to see trees as often as you do.

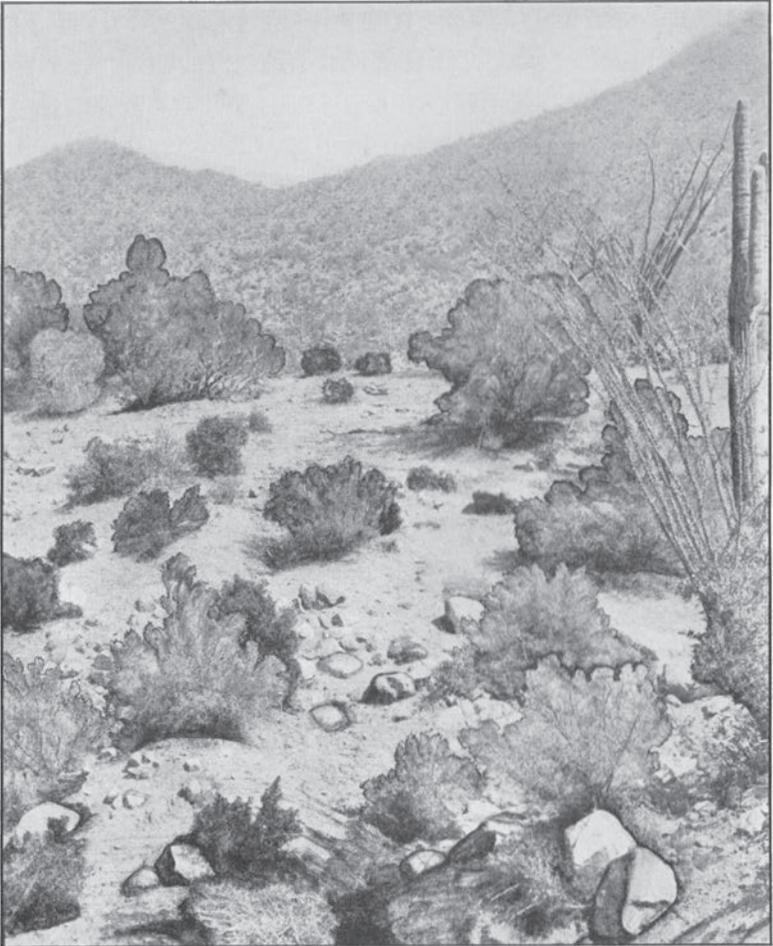
## *DESERT NEIGHBORS*

Are you beginning to wonder what a desert is? It is just a part of the country where very little rain falls. Sometimes whole seasons pass without any showers at all. In some deserts, several years may go by between really good rains. Then some of the plants die, but many of them manage to keep on living. They will grow leaves and flowers very quickly when rain falls on the land again.

Some deserts are so far north that snow covers the frozen ground in winter. Most of the plants in these deserts are small and bushy, with tough leaves. The sagebrush is one and the rabbitbrush is another. The cactus plants there have wide, flat joints and long spines; and they grow close to the ground. These are “prickly pears,” but they are much smaller than their relatives that grow in deserts farther south.

Shall we walk across one of those southern deserts? We soon notice that the plants do not grow close together, like those of forests or swamps or meadows. Desert bushes stand far apart, with bare sandy ground between them. In most places the ground has no grass. When there is grass, it also may grow in small clumps or bunches.

There is no grass on the ground we see in the picture opposite, but a flat place not far away has some. If you visit that flat place in the evening, you may see some little kangaroo rats. They will be smaller than “Bannertail,” who lives in a different desert. But they will hop on their long hind legs, just as he does, and will eat the ripe seeds of grass.



*The bushes are scattered with bare ground between them.*

## *DESERT NEIGHBORS*

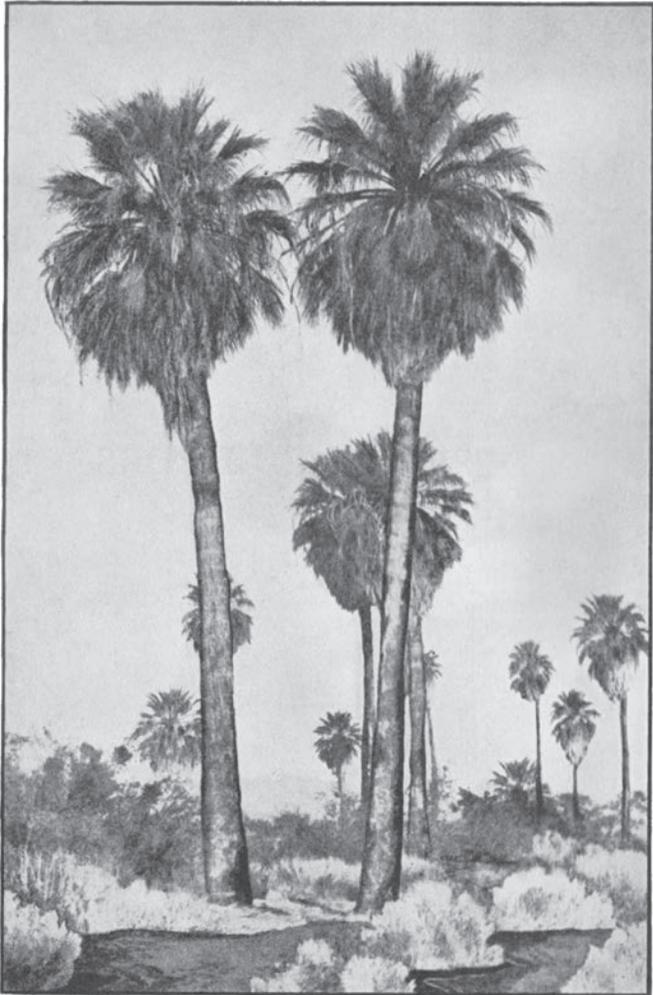
Plants do not crowd one another in deserts, because there is not enough water during most of the year. But when enough rain falls in late winter or very early spring, thousands and thousands of plants sprout from seeds lying in the sand or from roots hidden underground. They grow very rapidly and bloom. Then the desert valleys and hillsides become bright with orange-yellow poppies, blue or purple lupines, and pink sand verbenas. The beautiful flowers do not last very long. When dry weather comes again, the gay plants wither in the sun. Then their stems are broken and blown away by the wind. It piles them in corners or covers them with sand, and the ground between the bushes is left bare again.

But never think that deserts become dull and tiresome just because the flowers are gone! There is a desert near the southeastern corner of California where you will see nothing but sky and sand, yet the wind has piled the buff sand into such stately hills that you will be very sorry to leave them. In another desert, where Chuck and Testudo live, you will find mountains of rock weathered into all sorts of strange and beautiful shapes. And if you go to the White Sands, in New Mexico, you will find a great deal to do and see—even at a time when the yuccas are not in bloom and the bushes have no flowers.

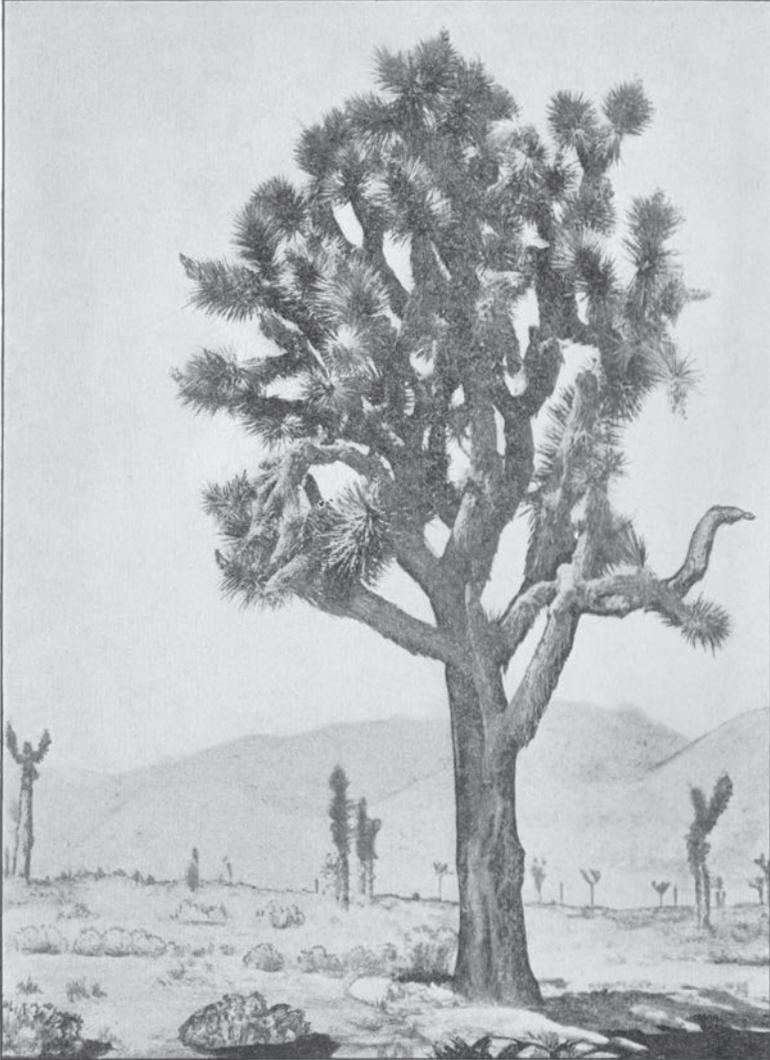
Of course, when you roam across the deserts, you will wish to see an oasis. There you will find springs of cold, good water that you will like to drink. Birds also drink it, and so do some other desert creatures. When the water seeps away through the sand, mesquite trees grow much bigger than they do in drier places.

## *VISITING A DESERT*

Among them will be tall cottonwood trees, with thicker trunks and wider leaves than those of the cottonwoods that grow on prairies. And if the oasis you visit is one of the very best sorts of all, some tall palm trees will lift their fan-shaped leaves above both mesquites and cottonwoods. The picture below shows just such an oasis, where there are more than twenty palms.



*Tall Fan Palms Growing in an Oasis*



*A Joshua tree is a member of the Lily Family.*

## VISITING A DESERT

On high slopes near the palm oasis you will see the strange Joshua trees. A great many of them grow in the valley at the very foot of the mountain where Chuck Walla lives. Joshua trees have large woody trunks with thick rough bark; yet they really belong to the Lily Family. Their greenish-white blossoms grow in large clusters. Each flower has six lobes, as do the flowers of their lily relatives. When you look at the delicate lilies in a flower garden, you may be surprised to think of their giant relatives—desert trees that sometimes grow to be about forty feet tall.

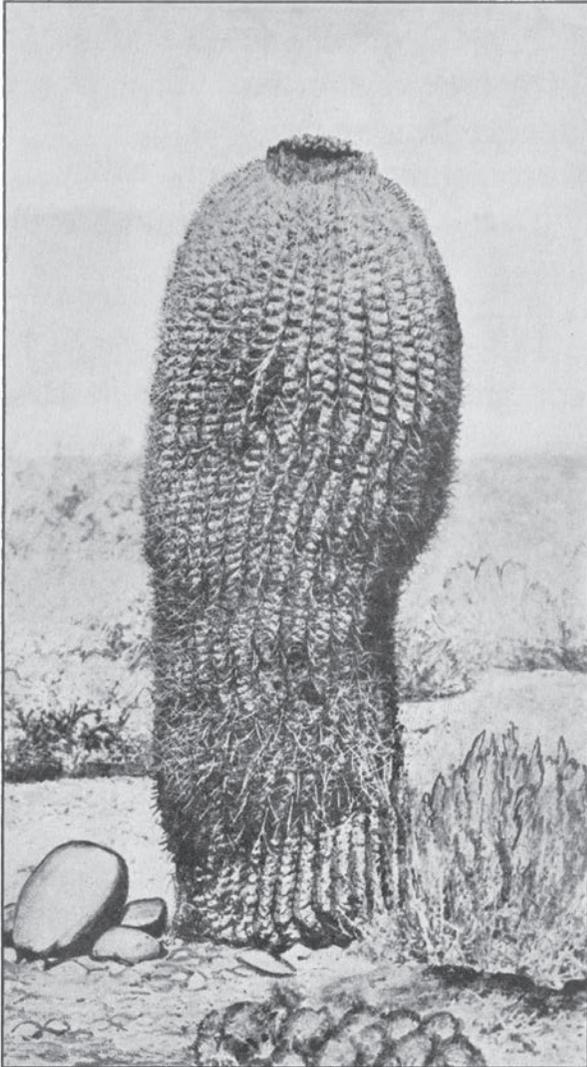
A Joshua tree is one kind of yucca. Yuccas have stiff, narrow, evergreen leaves with sharp, dagger-like points. It is because of these leaves that people call the yuccas “Spanish bayonets.” The yuccas you will see in the White Sands are different from those in some of the northern deserts; and there are yuccas of still another kind growing in the Texas desert where Cornu, the horned lizard, lives. Some have strong, coarse leaves, and some have thin leaves the edges of which split into fibers that hang in long tatters. But they all have their leaves in crowded tufts at the ends of the stems or branches; and they all have their whitish blossoms in branched clusters at the tips of straight stalks. The flower stalks of some of the yuccas are very tall indeed.

Shrubs that are common in deserts can stand much dry weather because they have roots that reach far down through the sand for water. Among the shrubs you are sure to meet are saltbush, creosote bush, and sagebrush.

The saltbush has mealy, whitish, leaves with a salty

## *DESERT NEIGHBORS*

taste. Sheep like these leaves and eat a great many of them. The saltbush belongs to the Pigweed Family (also called Goosefoot Family). Like other members of this family, it has small, greenish flowers growing in little clusters.



*A Barrel Cactus*

## VISITING A DESERT

A sagebrush, or wormwood, is not related to the true sages, which belong to the Mint Family, but it does have a rather sagelike odor. Its flowers are not pretty, and they have a lot of dusty, yellow pollen that is shaken out of them and blown about by the wind. But their grayish leaves and gnarled branches give sagebrushes a very attractive appearance and make the desert quite silvery.

The creosote bush is an evergreen shrub with a strong, though rather pleasant, odor. Its leaves are small and narrow, and the petals of its pretty little flowers are yellow and partly twisted.

In almost every desert, and in many places not quite dry enough to be true deserts, you will find the cacti. At first you may not like them, for they have sharp spines that hurt you if you put your hand on them. But after you learn to go near them very carefully you will probably decide that they are the strangest and most interesting of all desert plants. Even such names as barrel cactus, beaver tail, cholla (which is pronounced *cho-ya*), hedgehog, prickly pear, sahuaro, and staghorn, will make you wonder how they look.

As you may know, leafy plants depend on the green material in their leaves for their lives during their growing season. All these plants need sugar for food. It is the green stuff in their leaves that makes their sugar for them. The leaves are really sugar factories that work all day in the sunlight but cannot work at night. Cacti need sugar too. They have no useful leaves, but they keep the same green material in their stems. So their



*The Cholla in which Yodeler and his mate built their nest.*

## VISITING A DESERT

sugar factories are in their stems. (Some cacti have tiny leaves on their youngest joints.)

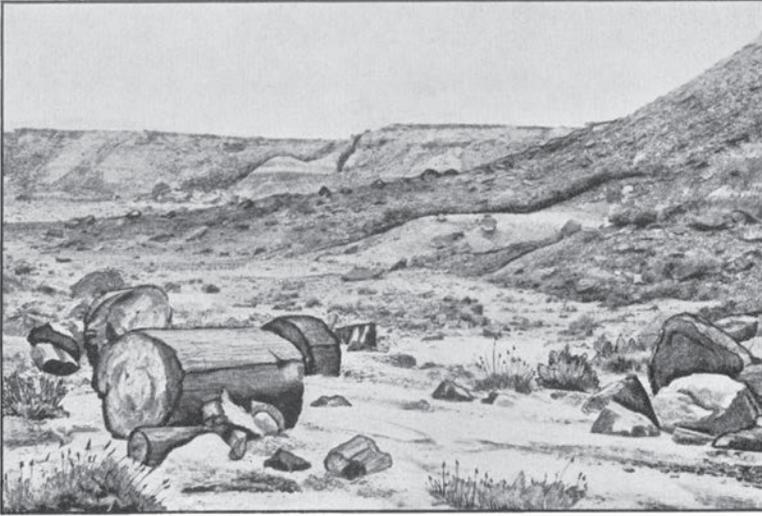
The thick stems of cacti also serve to hold their water supply. After rains, cacti take in water with their roots and store it in the pulpy part of their stems. At such times the ridges in the tall stem of a giant cactus (or sahuaro) look plump. In a long drought, however, the plant uses so much of its water supply that the ridges become shrunken and thin.

You will meet many cacti in the desert and see the pictures of some of them in this book. Which will you like best? Perhaps the cholla, in which cactus wrens often build their nests. Perhaps the giant cactus where Gila woodpeckers dig their home holes. Since a cactus of this sort sometimes grows to be thirty-five or forty feet tall, these birds can have homes far from the ground.

Plants change from season to season; and even the desert itself changes as year after year goes by. Rocks crack, wear, and begin to crumble into grains of sand. Strong winds move the sand from place to place, piling part of it in heaps about shrubs. It is such mounds that kangaroo rats, and pack rats too, often seek when making their homes.

The winds do not always blow the sands in straight processions. Sometimes they go in whirlwind parades. Then the wind, and the soil it carries, whirls round and round, or twists. A whirlwind may be a little "twister" only a few feet high, or it may reach up in a tall whirling pillar like a small tornado.

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*Crota's home among red stones which are broken parts of petrified trees.*

There are certain deserts where the sands are not all one color—not all light brown like those in Testudo's home, and not all white, like the gypsum in the White Sands. There also are deserts where there is more clay than sand, and the clay may be colored red, pink, brown, buff, and greenish, as well as several shades of gray. There are bright deserts of that sort in southern Utah. There is another beautiful one in Arizona. Nearly four hundred years ago, an explorer gave this desert a Spanish name that means the same as our words *painted desert*. It is on a hill just south of the Painted Desert that Crota lives and suns himself beside red stones that are bits of petrified trees. Some of his relatives live in the Painted Desert itself, and so do relatives of Shorthorn, the horned lizard you will meet in the third chapter.

When you go to the desert, don't stop for a day

## VISITING A DESERT

and drive away. And don't make your home in a hotel. Take a tent and camp beside tall cacti or among gnarled mesquite trees. You may expect it to be a very quiet camp—but probably you will be surprised. Cactus wrens will sing all day and Gambel quails will call *kurr, kur-kurr!* Bees will hum among mistletoe flowers. Doves will call *coo, coo, coo-oo-oo*. At sunset, crickets will start to chirp, and you will hear the thump of Jack's feet as he hops about in search of supper. Here and there a sleepy bird will twitter, and you may hear faint little chirps made by Bannertail and his neighbors. Then a desert fox will call *yap, yap!* making Bannertail hurry into his burrow.

If you are very lucky, a coyote will sit on a hill while he sings to friends far away on the desert. His song will start with a few barks; then it will rise in a high howl and end with several sharp yaps. It will surprise you and perhaps frighten you a bit at first, but soon you will begin to like it. As you listen to the song some night you will be glad when another coyote answers. After you have left the desert, one thing you will wish to go back for will be to sit near a cactus in the moonlight and hear a coyote sing!

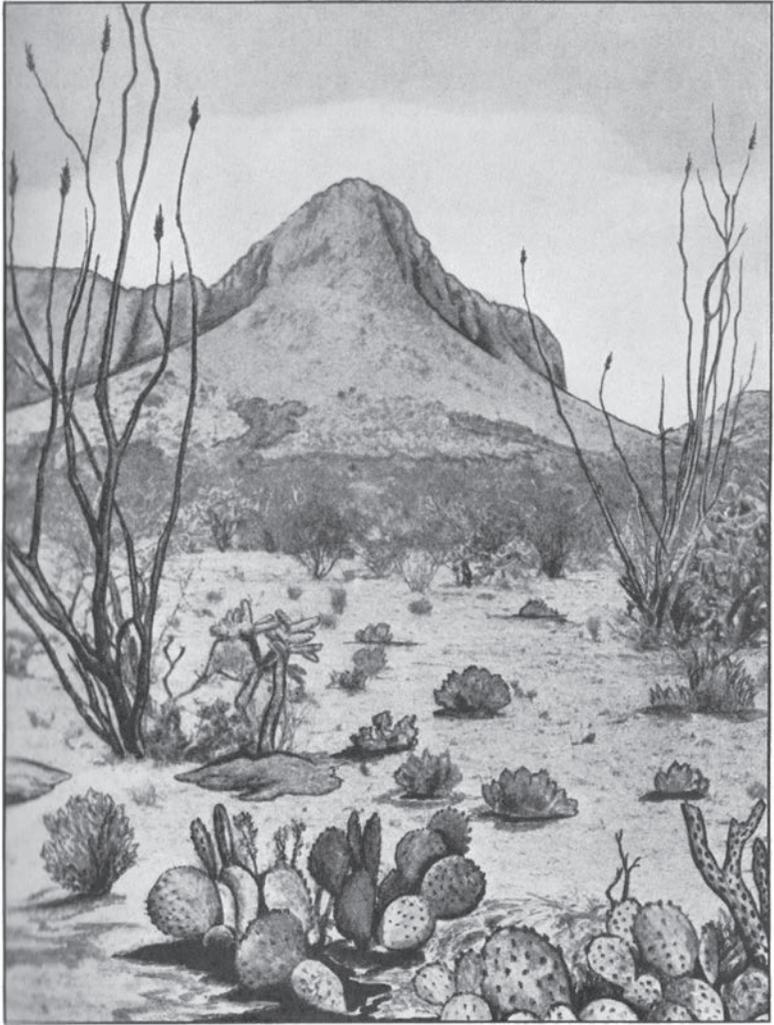
## CHAPTER II

# BANNERTAIL, WHO HOPPED LIKE A KANGAROO

THE August moon rose while Bannertail waited in one of the doorways of his home under a mesquite tree. He had lived in this home for a long time—ever since one summer night more than a year ago.

That was an exciting night: Bannertail was making his first visit to this part of the valley. He had wandered over from another place in the desert and was having a good time hopping here and there while he looked about. Then a hungry desert fox suddenly chased him, and Bannertail hurried into the first hole he found. He stayed there, hidden and quiet, until the fox became tired of waiting and trotted away.

The hole into which Bannertail rushed when the fox startled him was a long tunnel, or hallway, in a strange house. Soon after the desert fox left, Bannertail began to go slowly through this house. It had a mound of sand, almost four feet high, for its upper part. Under the mound were many halls that led down into rooms deep in the ground. Bannertail met no other little animals as



*Desert Scene near Bannertail's Home*

## DESERT NEIGHBORS



*The August moon rose while Bannertail waited  
in one of the doorways of his home under a mesquite tree.*

he went along these sloping tunnels. No one had been living in the house for many weeks. Some of the walls had crumbled and the place was not very tidy.

Still, Bannertail liked the empty, tumble-down house where he had found safety in a time of danger. He cleared out some of the rubbish that was in the way. Then he dug a place the right size to use for a bedroom. There were too many doorways opening outside to please him, so he plugged all but six of them with sand. Some of the rooms were good for storerooms. In these he began to put piles of food on the floor.

## *BANNERTAIL*

That August evening when the moon came up, Bannertail was thinking about grass seeds, good to eat, that were ripe enough to carry to his storerooms. When seeds were ready to harvest, he worked part of every pleasant night.

He was a bit timid as he came out to the roof of his mound house into the moonlight. He had never quite forgotten that there were foxes in his desert world. So he paused for a few moments to look with his big eyes and to listen with his round-rimmed ears.

Bannertail's body, sand-colored and white, was nearly as large as a rat's; but he was much prettier and daintier than a rat. His nose was pointed like that of a mouse and his whiskers were slender and sensitive. His long furry tail ended with a fluffy white tuft. While he waited outside his door, Bannertail sat on his big, strong hind legs, bracing himself with his tail which was stretched out behind him. His front feet did not touch the ground. They were very tiny, and he held them tucked up under his chin except when he needed to use them for hands.

This little creature really was a relative of rats, of mice, and of squirrels, but he did not act like these relatives when he traveled. If you could have seen him that night when he started off for his load of grass seeds, you would have laughed. He went with kangaroo jumps, hopping on his hind legs. At first he took rather short, slow hops and looked carefully about as he went. But soon he quickened his pace and was leaping three feet at each jump; and his tail stuck out in the air, with its

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tuft of white fur making a flag, or banner, behind him.

You can easily understand why little animals of this sort have been given rather queer names. They are neither rats nor kangaroos; but they are called “kangaroo rats,” because they look a bit like rats and travel like kangaroos. Some people call them “bannertails,” a quite good name for them, too.

As Bannertail went across the desert sand, he followed a narrow path, or road. He had made it himself, by hopping that way many times. It ran straight from his home to some grama grass whose tops were filled with yellow seeds. When he came to the grass, Bannertail stopped and filled his pockets with the seedy tips.

Bannertail’s pockets were two fur-lined pouches, one on each side of his face. When they were full, he looked as if he had the mumps!

When his pouches could not hold another grass seed, he hopped back along his path and dodged through one of his doorways into a long tunnel. The tunnel was dark, but he moved quickly, going round corners and through more doorways. Perhaps his long whiskers were a help to him and kept him from bumping his nose. As soon as he reached a storeroom, he emptied his pouches by pushing against them with two jerks of his front paws, or hands. Then he hopped away for another load.

While he worked, Bannertail listened. Though the desert seemed peaceful, there were creatures living there who would like a kangaroo rat for supper. Once an owl flew overhead—and Bannertail kept so very

## BANNERTAIL

quiet that the hungry bird never guessed he was not just a part of the sand. Far away a fox barked—and Bannertail stopped gathering grain till he knew that the fox was not coming toward him. While he waited, he made a thumping sound by hitting his heels against the ground.

Bannertail had a habit of thumping like that when he was alarmed and nervous and ready to run away. It may be that the other kangaroo rats, who were gathering seeds near by, heard the noise of his heels or felt the jar of the ground. Perhaps Bannertail's thumps seemed like a danger signal to them. Some of the other kangaroo rats began to thump on the ground in the same way. Had they been warned by Bannertail's nervous heels? Or had they, too, heard the distant fox barking?

The creature that surprised Bannertail most that night was a coyote. He came so silently that the kangaroo rat, busy with his harvesting, did not notice him until the wolf was very close. Then Bannertail jumped straight up into the air, leaving the coyote right *under* him, snapping at the ground where Bannertail had been a moment before. More quickly than the coyote could look up, Bannertail was on his way. After taking a few jumps five or six feet long, he came to a burrow near a cholla cactus. He did not try to go home—that was too far away. He escaped by darting into this near burrow, which was so deep and long that no coyote could dig him out. Bannertail hid there until long after the wolf left that part of the desert; but after a while he recovered from his fright and went home.

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One fall night, when Bannertail's storerooms were nearly full, he left his home to *play*. His leaps were as long as those he had once taken to escape the coyote, but this time he was jumping with joy. He came to a bare, dusty spot under a mesquite tree and began to hop up and down there as if he were trying to reach a leaf that dangled from the tip of a low branch.

While Bannertail played, neighbors joined him. In a few minutes there were six happy kangaroo rats near the mesquite tree. One hopped round and round in circles on the sand, another jumped back and forth over tall grass tops, while the others took long running leaps. They frolicked together like the best of friends.

Suddenly, Bannertail left his comrades. He felt hungry and hopped to a place where he had once found some extra good seeds. He seemed to know just where to go, but when he got there he took little hops among the desert plants and smelled of different seed tips, seeking those he liked best. While he was hunting, three neighbors came. They hopped and sniffed, too, often coming close to Bannertail. For about five minutes he did not object to their company; but after he found the seeds he wanted most, he stopped being friendly. He began to pack the favorite food into his pouches; and every time another kangaroo rat hopped too near, Bannertail jumped over him and kicked. His neighbor had to dodge very quickly to avoid being hit by Bannertail's heels.

One night, on returning to his home after such an evening of fun and feasting, Bannertail found



*The coyote who tried to catch Bannertail.*

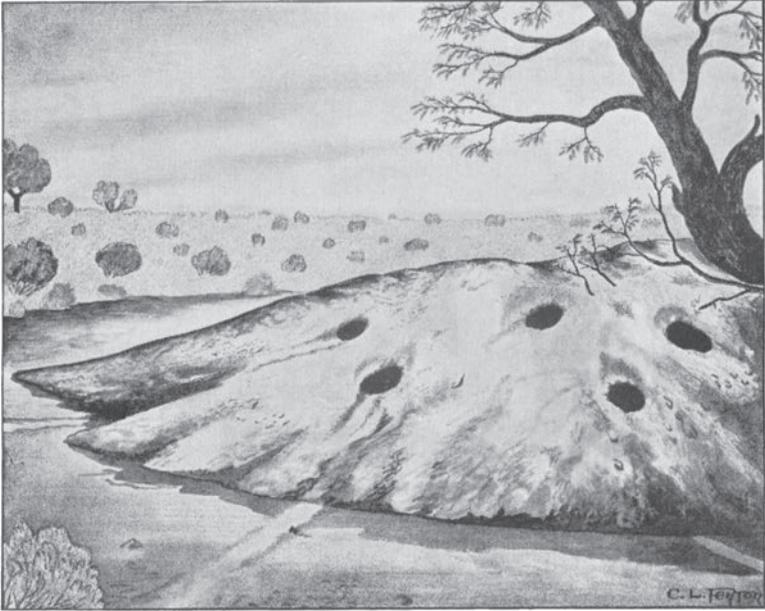
## *DESERT NEIGHBORS*

something that made him angry. It was the track of Buff, going into Bannertail's door. Buff was a kangaroo rat but not of the same kind as Bannertail. He was much smaller and lighter colored. He lived not far away under an ocotilla. (An ocotilla is a spiny desert shrub with very tall, slender, upright stems and splendid scarlet flowers. Another name for it is "candlewood.") Buff's house had plenty of long halls, but it was not very large and had no big rooms to fill with seeds. He gathered some food for himself; but when he wanted a lot to eat, he went where he could get it most easily—to the pantries of his bigger and busier relatives. Just then he was in one of Bannertail's storerooms stuffing his pouches as full as he could while the owner of the house was away.

When Bannertail came home, Buff suddenly found himself in trouble. Two powerful feet hit his back and he was pushed out of the room in a way that made him know he was an unwelcome guest. He dodged into a tunnel, dropping the seeds from his pouches as he went. Bannertail followed him, kicking him several times before he reached the door. It was a very scared and sore little Buff who hurried out of the house and hopped down one of the roads that led from Bannertail's home.

For many weeks before Buff's visit, the weather had been dry and the sky had been sunny by day and starry by night. Then, a few days after that event, the sky became dull and cloudy. The first of the rain fell in a fine misty drizzle. A little later came flashes of lightning and rumbles of thunder, while the rain poured down in what is called a "cloudburst." The storm filled the great dry arroyo, or gully, with a muddy river and sent

## BANNERTAIL



*Bannertail's Mound House*

a sheet-flood over one place where Bannertail liked to gather seeds. Fortunately for him, the water did no real damage to his house, for it did not flood his tunnels and soak his storerooms.

Bannertail stayed indoors during the rainy day and all through the cool wet night that followed. He slept most of the next day, which was cool and drizzly. At sunset he went to the door, looked out, and returned to his comfortable, dry tunnels. The damp sand did not interest him. He did not even care to go to a puddle for a drink of water.

Rainy weather kept Bannertail in his house; but cold nights did not bother him. Even when a chilly wind came from the north, freezing some of the prickly-pear

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joints, Bannertail went out as usual. When he did not wish to gather seeds, he played, hopping up and down by himself until his neighbors came to join him in some jumping game.

One night in the midst of a frolic, Bannertail saw something strange. It was a tin can dropped by people who had been having a picnic on the desert. He stopped jumping and turned his back to the shining object and kicked. *Spat, spat!* went the grains of sand as they hit the tin. Bannertail looked to see what would happen. Would the queer thing run away? When he found that nothing happened, he came closer and kicked more sand at the can. Still the can paid no attention to him, so he kicked again. After that he put his head near enough to sniff at the tin. Deciding that it was not good enough to eat, he hopped lazily away.

As he hopped, he found some bits of bread left by the picnickers. He kicked sand on them. As they did not run away or turn to fight him, he nibbled one piece and found that it had a pleasant taste. He tucked the other pieces into his pouches and carried them home. It was time to go to bed for the day, in his nest far down at the end of a long winding tunnel. But first he would put the bread into a storeroom. It would be very good to eat for his luncheon when he was hungry.