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DIPODOMYS, THE BEAUTIFUL RAT

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by

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Not many months ago I walked into the office of the head of the Zoology Department of the University of Arizona. On the point of giving the usual greeting, I suddenly forgot all about it. The Doctor was seated at his desk and peering over the rim of his gray shoulder were a furry white nose and a pair of big soft eyes. The head came up and the tawny grayish body of a kangaroo rat. He perched himself comfortably and began to wash his face with his white fingers, then all of a sudden he reached around and picked up his long tail and finished wiping his face with the bushy end of it, as if it was a towel to complete his morning ablutions. He was as unconcerned as if he was in his bathroom instead of the august office of a professor. When he had finished he reared himself and sat squatted on his over-long hind legs just as a kangaroo does, and just as much at home as if he was sitting under a soap bush in the desert.

In our travels in the arid regions of eastern Oregon, we have often found ourselves at night time in strange beds, and with strange bed fellows. One night our family of four and the naturalist pup bedded down in a haystack in a field along the highway. The night was cold and clear and we all crawled under as deeply as we could. There were only the stars for candles and they glittered like icicles. We had hardly got settled down when the small boy threw up an arm and scattered hay in all directions. "Something crawled over my face and scratched," he said. The flash-light flared out and there scurrying his way over our shuffling bedquilt was a sleek little fellow with a long tail, his round eyes glowing green in the night. It was a kangaroo rat that we had scared out of his own snug bed.

I grabbed at him and made another big hole in our bedquilt, but finally caught him in my hand. He struggled and twisted, and felt like a piece of rumpiled silk, but not once did he try to bite. I stowed him in an empty tin can in the car. In the morning we got out the cameras ready for pictures.

It took some time to quiet him down and reassure him that we were not going to hang him for a spy.

Dipodomys soon became one of the family and vagabonded with us over the high desert, adjusting himself comfortably to a nomadic life. During the middle of the day, which is his sleepy time, he cuddled in his little box with cotton for a mattress, waking up to nibble grain for his rations and sometimes taking a taste of apple, though this was foreign to his menu and only a condescension. It seemed as if he had adopted us instead of the other way around, for many a time he could have jumped out of an open window.

At home in Portland, he immediately took delight in examining all the runways in our big burrow. He scampered softly from one room to another, stopping to sniff in a corner, taking a spin up a drapery, then back down among the feet under the supper table. Once he took a kangaroo leap at the corner of the cloth hanging down, climbed up and investigated the alleys between the saltcellars and the sugar bowl, finally scrambling into an empty tea-cup, looking out as if had found a good foxhole. In the desert he never missed water for there was usually none to drink, and he could go without it no one knows how long. At home when a saucer of water was put down on the floor, he dipped his fingers in and licked them off. For a desert waif, he learned fast. At least, he had curiosity enough to try anything once.

He is called a Pocket Rat, or Kangaroo Rat. The kangaroo part of the name seems to fit, for he does travel in bounding leaps like the kangaroo. But the rat of it seems a real offense to this gentle, friendly little fellow of the soft, silky coat, expressive eyes, and all white breast and feet. He is as far removed from the treacherous rat tribe as he is from the Marsupials. The Pocket Rat has no maternity pouch for its young, but it does have external, hair-lined cheek pouches which are usually bulging with seeds and berries of various kinds, often stuffing his pockets until he looks as if had the mumps. Nearly all members of this group live in the desert or arid plains, and they are most numerous in the Southwest. They have the habit of building up small mounds, sometimes in groups of three or

four under the edges of the bushes. Some of the entrances are closed up and can only be found by following lines of tiny footprints across the bare patches from bush to bush. On chilly nights they do not move about much, but on mornings following a warm night their lines of fresh tracks are plentiful.

All of the species are nocturnal, and as far as known none of them hibernate. When caught, they cry out in a fine squeak, but if held gently they soon cease struggling and lose all fear. Their eyes are evidently sensitive to strong light, and in a short time of exposure they close them.

Sometimes when I looked at Dippy I felt a little solemn when I thought of the nights in the desert when he and his kin came out to take ecstatic kangaroo leaps under the spell of the moon, or dash headlong into their burrows to escape the clutching talons of an owl, or the teeth of a hunting coyote. Of course, he was safe and seemingly happy, and he had given us a lot of joy. But safety isn't always a recompense for adventure under the moon.