

BOTANY-MEDICINE

# Chemist Describes Poison Ivy And Tells What to Do About It

**P**OISON ivy and what to do about it was the subject of a Science Service radio talk given recently over the network of the Columbia Broadcasting System by Dr. James F. Couch, of the U. S. Department of Agriculture.

Dr. Couch, who has given much attention to this poisonous weed, said that the best thing to do about it is to keep away from it as completely as possible. The next best, if one must go where one is likely to come in contact with it, is to be ready for eventualities with a proved remedy. Such a remedy, he said, is a five per cent. solution of potassium permanganate in water. This chemical is obtainable at any drug store, is cheap and safe, and is not a proprietary or "patent" medicine.

## Not Hard to Tell

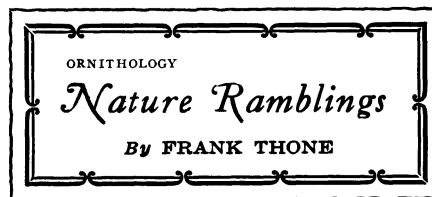
It is not hard to tell poison ivy when you see it, said Dr. Couch. The poison ivy of the East and the poison oak of the West look just about alike: they are glossy-leaved shrubs or sometimes vines climbing trees by means of short roots. Their leaves are always divided into three leaflets; whence the old saying, "Leaflets three, let it be!" They have a relative, the poison sumac of the East, that looks like common sumac, but unlike it always grows in bogs and has hanging white berries in-

stead of stiffly upright bunches of brown ones like the common sumac.

"In spite of the immense amount of chemical investigation performed on these plants," Dr. Couch explained, "the poisonous substance has not yet been isolated with certainty in a pure condition. All of these investigators obtained oily substances that were very toxic and that would produce blistering in incredibly small amounts. Pfaff named it 'toxicodendrol' and it appears to be present in all species of *Rhus* that can cause dermatitis. All parts of the plant contain this substance. The green berries are poisonous but the ripe ones do not appear to contain enough to cause blistering. Toxicodendrol is a complex substance that belongs to the group of compounds called phenols by the chemist. This group contains other members that are capable of blistering the skin but none that are so active as this from poison ivy. Since toxicodendrol is soluble in fats it readily penetrates to the lower layers of the human skin where it sets up the painful irritation so well known to its victims."

*Science News Letter, June 27, 1931*

An Australian explorer plans an expedition into the desert of central Australia where traditions tell of a cave containing fabulous gold treasure.



Catbird

**I**F SOME morning you hear what sounds like a couple of kittens in distress you had better look into the trees round about, to see that there isn't a catbird somewhere, dodging in and out among the leaves, laughing to himself at having made a belated April fool of you.

The catbird is a long-tailed, moderately slender, sleek-feathered bird, slate-gray all over, darker on back and crown and tail than on his under side. He has a large repertoire of music other than his cat-call, which indeed is apparently uttered mainly in alarm or anger, or possibly sometimes in mischief. He is quite as able an imitator as his near relatives, the brown thrasher and the mocking-bird of the South, though his attempts at more ambitious and original melody, while good, are not so excellent as theirs. He has little fear of man, and often appears in the outskirts of cities. He builds his nest quite low, seldom more than ten feet above ground.

In two things the catbird has a bad reputation. Some naturalists accuse him of robbing the nests of other birds; and the birds themselves bear witness, for they dislike his company and frequently "gang up" to do him violence. In the Middle West he is also somewhat of a nuisance in orchards, for about half his fare consists of plant food. It is stated, however, that he really prefers wild fruits and berries, and will steal cultivated fruits only when the native supply is lacking.

*Science News Letter, June 27, 1931*

A train which is equipped throughout with an air-cooling and purifying system is to be put in service on an eastern railroad this summer.

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