

FRIENDS OR FOES?

NEW ZEALAND'S
FEATHERED IMMIGRANTS.WAS THEIR INTRODUCTION A
MISTAKE?

III.

(By J. DRUMMOND.)

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THE SMALL BIRDS AS A
COMPANY.

A mass of evidence is brought forward against the company of small birds as a whole, apart from individual species.

Most of the information on this point is supplied in reply to the eighteenth question on the circular, which is as follows:—"Generally speaking, have the introduced birds done more good than harm or more harm than good?"

A typical reply is from Wairere, Wairarapa North: "As with most aliens, it would be better if they had stayed at home." The same sentiment is expressed in other words many times. One correspondent says that the introduction of English birds, taking them together, was "a terrible mistake." Another says: "For goodness sake, don't make it worse by importing any more of them." A fruit-grower at Patutahi, Poverty Bay, refuses to give his views, as the space left in the circular for the reply to the question is far too limited to enable him to say all he wants to say.

The Lower Hutt, in the Wellington district, is a market gardening centre, and the following catalogue of a resident's grievances, together with his general sweeping statement, seems to show that the small birds are particularly numerous there:—"One acre of cabbage and cauliflower plants destroyed entirely last year; vegetable garden seeds picked out, necessitating netting; currants entirely eaten up; cannot ripen one gooseberry; raspberries saved with the greatest difficulty, by picking twice daily; impossible to grow wheat, quarter-acre picked absolutely clean last year; oats pulled out when about two inches high, and have to sow double quantities, to allow for destruction; whole treefuls of the best sorts of plums destroyed. The destruction, in short, is so great as to seriously interfere with cropping arrangements, to bar several valuable lines, and to render gardening, both domestic and market, simply heartbreaking."

At Ellesmere (Canterbury) and Fendalton, it is impossible to grow barley unless sown at the right season, otherwise the birds will take the whole crop.

Farmers in the Lincoln district (North Canterbury) generally agree to sow their wheat at about the same time, so that the birds' attacks will be fairly divided. "If one of us had an early crop," a farmer in that district says, "all the birds would concentrate their efforts upon it, and they would have it eaten up very soon; but when we act in concert, the birds bestow their attention over the whole area, and one farmer does not have to bear the whole of the brunt."

The replies to the eighteenth question, in fact, leave no doubt whatever that a vast majority of the classes of the community most interested in the doings of the birds firmly believe that their introduction was a disastrous mistake, that they do immeasurably more harm than good, and that their banishment, if it was possible, would be exceedingly desirable. The consensus of opinion is expressed in too clear, concise and emphatic a manner to leave any shadow of doubt as to the strong antagonism felt towards English birds.

Many farmers, however, modify their condemnation by expressing an opinion that if the birds could be kept in check they would be converted from enemies to friends.

I cannot help thinking that that is the proper attitude to adopt. The birds are far from being altogether bad. A forgetful generation may have a short memory, but great services given in the past must not be ignored when the birds are on their trial.

ESTIMATED DAMAGE.

Attempts have been made to estimate the damage done by the birds and to place a value on it. At a conference of local bodies held in Christchurch to consider the best means of dealing with the nuisance, the damage was set down at 5s per acre, on cultivated land. If the average throughout the colony was only half that sum, the total loss must be enormous, as last year the total area under crops in the colony was 1,494,722 acres, 661,926 acres being in grain crops. Besides that total, there were 17,176 acres in garden and 27,482 in orchard.

HOW TO KEEP SMALL BIRDS IN
CHECK.

Some of the inquiries were directed towards ascertaining what steps have been taken to keep the birds in check, and what success has been achieved.

The plan most favoured is the laying of poisoned grain and the payment for heads and eggs. This plan seems to have been fairly effective when combined action is taken, but it has often failed where there is lack of combination. The natural increase is checked by this means, but there are few instances of any material diminution in numbers having been made. In the orchards in the North Island the gun is used. At the Bird Sanctuary on Little Barrier Island, the nests of blackbirds,

thrushes, sparrows and finches are destroyed when opportunities occur, and it is thought that this probably keeps the English birds in check on the island.

In several districts heads and eggs are paid for, and poisoned wheat is distributed free by local authorities. In other districts netting is resorted to. Local bodies pay for heads, eggs and young. Mr J. Wolfe, a Lincoln (North Canterbury) farmer, states that the system of purchase has the desired effect to a great extent. He also informed me that he was the first to use strychnine poison in the district, having commenced to do so twenty-six years ago, and he has been poisoning ever since, with good results.

A very miscellaneous lot of suggestions are offered as to the best means of checking the nuisance. A gentleman at Temuka has prepared a scheme providing for legislation to compel all land-owners to produce a certain number of sparrows during the winter months. Several farmers suggest that long nets, such as bird-catchers use, could be brought into requisition by capable men with effect. The Government is recommended to give a bonus for the production of a poison that will be readily eaten by the birds, and one correspondent thinks that a bonus should be given for the best trap. There is a strong feeling in favour of the introduction of English owls, sparrow hawks and other birds of prey. A practical observation is that the towns ought to be compelled to do more than at present, as they are breeding places, from which the birds swarm into the country districts. Among the most novel suggestions are the systematic employment of armies of small boys at nesting and the use of electric wires stretched round fields of crops, the wires to be charged with electricity, in order to give the birds severe shocks.

The most practical scheme, and the one that is evidently more acceptable than any other, is thorough and systematic poisoning. The whole operation, it is urged, should be controlled by the Agricultural Department, which should be armed with compulsory powers, so that it could compel all farmers in one district to act in unison.

PHEASANTS AND QUAIL.

The common pheasant (*Phasianus colchicus*) and the ring-necked pheasant (*Phasianus torquatus*) have had a strange and eventful history in this country.

At first their acclimatisation was a notable and almost an unqualified success. They succeeded wherever they were introduced, increasing very rapidly and rearing healthy and hardy broods of young. One of the first successes was achieved by Sir Frederick Weld in 1865, when he established the common pheasant in Canterbury. Other importations into this province followed, the Acclimatisation Society bringing out fairly large numbers. In 1868 it bred forty birds and sold them to members for £2 a pair. In the tussock-covered land of Canterbury they thrived specially well, and the large Cheviot Estate, then held by the Hon W. Robinson, was soon stocked with them. Mr Robinson spared no expense in preparing for their reception when he arranged for a consignment, supplied by the Society. He erected commodious aviaries, ordered that all the cats on the estate should be killed, nearly extirpated the wekas, and had hawks destroyed at the rate of six a day. The society continued to import pheasants for a considerable time. It bred about 100 birds in a year, and obtained a fairly good income by selling them to the owners of large estates. It seemed as if pheasants would, in a few years, spread throughout both islands and become thoroughly naturalised. After this had gone on for some time, the birds received a decided check. Their numbers neither increased nor decreased. Then they began to decrease rapidly, and, apparently, almost simultaneously in many districts. Their complete failure, taking the colony as a whole, is now beyond doubt. In Canterbury and other provinces where they were once exceedingly plentiful they are never seen at all. "Once plentiful, but decreasing or disappeared," are the words generally written against them in the circulars.

This result, which is very regrettable from the sportsman's point of view, is attributed to the laying of poison for rabbits, to the depredations of stoats, weasels and wild cats, to bush fires, and, in a lesser degree, to the pheasants' food supplies being eaten by the smaller introduced birds. It is stated that the wekas as well as the stoats and weasels, eat pheasants' eggs. The birds are decreasing as rapidly in districts where there is plenty of cover, as in districts where there is little or none. The destruction done by bush fires is shown by the following statement from a farmer at Mangahao, Pahiatua, Wellington district: "When sowing grass seed after bush fires seven years ago I came across thousands of nests with the remains of eggs and the charred bones of the pheasants that had been sitting on them. They were very plentiful here once, but now, when one is seen, half the town and country is after it to shoot it."

In large numbers of cases the decrease has been almost simultaneous with the arrival of stoats and weasels, which seem to have set about the work of extirpation without any unnecessary delay. A rather striking remark is made by a farmer at Ruatanihi, who says that there are only a few pheas-

ants in his district now, and those that are there are "only old cock birds."

The reports received show that pheasants now exist in numbers worth counting in only the North Island. The Poverty Bay district, on the east coast of the North Island, is the only district in which they are reported as "numerous," and they seem to be working towards the interior. In the few districts where they are at all plentiful they are regarded by agriculturists as a thorough nuisance. A farmer at Parua Bay describes them as "the greatest curse settlers have to contend against." At Hokianga they are "ruination to the farmer and the gardener." They destroy young grass, pull up maize and eat it, and attack potatoes, carrots, beans, peas, barley, wheat, and many kinds of fruit.

A strong testimony is given against them by Mr W. E. Draper, of Waerenga, who classes them with both species of introduced quail in the following condemnation:—

"I am a large grower of fruit, such as strawberries, grapes, peaches, plums and so on. The ravages committed by the pheasants and quail are a serious matter for me. I cannot offer strawberries for sale with a piece pecked out of one side, nor does it suit me to find the ground between the rows sprinkled with half-ripe berries bitten off. The birds perambulate a row of vines, and completely destroy every grape on a row five or six chains long. When I sow a field of clover the soil is scratched and the seed eaten. If a stop is not put to the increase of these pests, no man in his sober senses will embark on fruit culture in country districts infested by them. My opinion is that it is little better than criminal folly to keep a clove season for these birds. I have counted twenty-five pheasants on about one acre of potatoes on the lake side, and I have put up nineteen on my own place when traversing a distance of thirty chains. Up to about nine years ago, I supplied strawberries up to the middle of June. The berries come now, as before, but they are all destroyed by the pheasants and the quail, especially the latter. In former years I have sold in March, April, and May from ten to fifteen hundredweight of strawberries. Now they are all destroyed."

The two species of quail introduced,

the swamp quail (*Synœcus australis*) and the Californian quail (*Callipepla californica*) have been hardly more successful than the pheasants. They never increased so readily, however, and their failure is not so marked. The Californian quail is still plentiful in some of the North Island districts, where farmers write against its name, "no good." At Te Puke, in the Maketu district, quail live largely on clover, taking both the seed and the young plants in the bush clearings. Stoats and weasels, cats, poison, and bush fires are their enemies. In regard to Californian quail, a farmer at Ngatimaru says: "I have noticed that this bird wants fairly large tracts of land. It is also better if the land is hilly, and broken with bush and scrub here and there. It seems to get on very well on land where there is plenty of bush. On other land it does well for a time, and then its numbers are decreased, for what reason I do not know, unless it is on account of the cats, which, I think, are largely to blame."

A farmer in the Motu district, in the Auckland province, says that quail need more protection, and he suggests that private owners should proclaim their properties private sanctuaries, and every third year should be a close one.

THE TWO SWANS.

There is a very striking contrast between the white swan and the black swan in respect to their acclimatisation in New Zealand. The black swan is near the top of the list of successes, while the white swan has increased slowly, and with obvious difficulty, and has sometimes quite failed to establish itself. The black swan, in fact, has shown much greater adaptability than the other species, whose first attempts at incubation in Christchurch and other places were utterly ineffective.

The black swan settled down at once to its new conditions. It was introduced into Canterbury partly with the object of destroying watercress in the Avon. In a few years the birds had increased largely, but in 1867 many of them forsook the Avon and made long, and rather notable migrations to the wild country on the West Coast and to Otago and even Marlborough. Less than twenty were liberated on the Avon at first by the Christchurch City Council. These birds did the work desired from them, as they cleared a pathway through the watercress for the

current. In 1880 there were hundreds of black swans on the Avon and Halswell Rivers, as well as the Heathcote, as many as 500 sometimes being counted on small areas. They achieved the same success in Otago, where about sixty were liberated from 1860 to 1870.

Black swans are now found in thousands on lakes, estuaries, and lagoons in many parts of the colony, from the extreme north to the far south. They keep much to the wild regions. In some places they wage a deadly war on the native ducks, taking their food supplies from them and persecuting them relentlessly.

FURTHER INTRODUCTIONS
SUGGESTED.

A rather striking aspect of the inquiries is that there is not the same consensus of opinion against the introduction of more English birds as there is against those we have already. Further introductions are suggested with quite as much confidence as characterised the first introductions, forty years ago.

The twenty-eighth question on the circular was: "Do you think that any other English birds could be introduced advantageously? If so, state the species you favour." The replies show that only a few of the correspondents are opposed to further introductions, although several sound a warning that English birds are liable to change their habits on coming to a new land and living under new conditions.

It is very clear that sentiment must still be reckoned with. This is shown by the fact that many more votes have been cast in favour of robin redbreast than in favour of any other bird that can be thought of. He heads the list of suggested importations of the future. Jenny Wren is not very far down in the list, and this may be taken as further evidence that sentiment in regard to the birds of the Old Country is not dead. It is expected, however, that robin redbreast will be useful as well as ornamental. The swallow comes next to the robin, then several kinds of martins, then the plovers, the swift and the wagtail, in that order. The cuckoo is a general favourite. Other birds named are the stonechat, shrike, snipe, more lapwings and hedgosparrrows, flycatcher, tits, titmouse, white-throat, nightingale (which, by the way, has only one vote), water-ousel, stork, American flycatcher and kingbird, goatsucker, grouse, black cock, partridge (French and English), jackdaw, nightjar, woodpecker, whinchat, wheatear, pipit, wryneck, crow and butcher-bird.

I supply this list for what it is worth, and in order to give some indication of the feeling on the subject. The advisability of introducing any of the birds named is a matter that should be gone into with great care when definite steps in regard to further importations are contemplated, and it could hardly be discussed satisfactorily here. The facts brought to light in respect to acclimatisation in New Zealand are sufficiently striking to be a warning against thoughtless action in the future. It might be advisable to forbid the importation of any more foreign birds without the sanction of a committee of experts, which could be appointed.

CONCLUSION.

The inquiry has not put an end to the controversy, which is one of those things that will continue as long as small birds and farmers exist. The lines of demarcation are too faint, and too hard to define, to enable it to be said with any certainty that the introduction of small birds into this colony was a mistake. The question rests largely upon speculative opinion, and absolute settlement need never be looked for.

A great deal of the evidence I have collected is confusing, and a little of it is obviously the outcome of prejudice and bitter enmity. There is, however, less of this than I expected. For the most part, the conclusions arrived at by the hundreds of correspondents who have returned the circulars are based upon actual observations extending over thirty or forty years.

Many of those who went to the trouble of filling in the circulars are in the advantageous position of having known the small birds both at Home and in the colonies, and they are in a good position to make comparisons, and note changes that have taken place in the birds' habits. In some cases considerable trouble has been taken, the circulars being accompanied by long letters. By the adoption of this system of seeking information men have been reached who would never have imparted their knowledge in any other way. Several of the correspondents have been good enough to commend the system. They have expressed their willingness to supply more detailed information, if desired, and they suggest that the system should be extended to other subjects that interest the agriculturist.

The evidence has been weighed carefully, and in forming conclusions I have endeavoured to be just to men and birds alike. The summary of the results, at any rate, is impartial, and I think I can claim that on the prominent points of the controversy a consensus of expert opinion throughout the colony is now placed at the disposal of all who wish to have it.

I have to thank Mr T. W. Kirk, Government Biologist, for his kindness in seeing that the circulars were distributed, and in having the replies sent to me.