

XVII.

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Adequate protection of native fauna should be of foremost importance in every country; and especially in a land which is undergoing the transition from a state of Nature to that of civilization, as is the case of Australia, and certainly all worthy Australians who give a moment's thought to the matter would be in sympathy with any movement that had for its objective the saving to posterity of the wonderful and exquisite fauna of their continent.

In the transformation from the natural and wild state to that of civilization there are bound to be some forms (and unfortunately history has already proved it a fact) that are not able to adapt themselves to the altered conditions. Australia has already during its comparatively short existence lost for ever some of its fauna. So there is no time to waste. We must all see to it at once that the list of apparently extinct indigenous faunal forms does not grow any larger.

Naturally the first question we ask ourselves is—What are the causes of the decimation among our birds? And the answer comes back under five headings:—

1. Man has made a clean sweep of all the natural growth from the land, thereby the natural facilities for nesting and feeding are done away with.

2. Bush-fires.—Of course, this cause existed before white men came to Australia, but was no doubt due to accident, and so was of rare occurrence, but now the practice of systematically burning is in vogue everywhere, and bush-fires are prevalent, consequently at short intervals the ground and slow-flying birds are subject to an ordeal that must inevitably destroy large numbers.

3. At different times animals have been introduced which have thrived under their altered conditions, and now are in such numbers as to be a large factor in the reduction of the number of our native birds.

4. Poisoning of food or water.

5. Shooting and trapping.

Of these five reasons the first is the cause of the thinning out of our birds more than the other four reasons put together; it therefore is the most important, and because of the opposition that is bound to come to the only feasible solution, will require all the united effort that nature-lovers can exert. Of course, the only remedy for this is to persuade the various Governments to set aside a large area of virgin country as a totally-protected reserve in each new district that is opened up. I am afraid that in the settled districts, where the land has already left the Crown, very little in this way could be done; but in new districts this could be done, and would mean comparatively little pecuniary loss to the Governments, but would materially assist in maintaining the existence of our valuable fauna.

No doubt, the bush-fires that periodically ravage the country greatly reduce the numbers of our birds, both by destroying the individuals and by destroying their nests with eggs and young, for it is generally in the summer or nesting season that the country is fired. Unfortunately, there seems little that we can do to overcome this, because it is apparently necessary that the country should be at times burnt down, but if large reserves were available, as suggested above, the damage done under this heading would be minimized.

The introduced pests, such as the fox, and domestic cats that have taken to the bush, take a number of the ground birds, and every opportunity should be taken to get rid of these pests; but the percentage of birds taken in this way is not very appreciable, and although, of course, it would be better to do

away with this cause, if possible, yet the seriousness of it is almost negligible when compared with the first cause.

The practice of poisoning waterholes and laying of poison food is one that strikes horror into the soul of one who has the welfare of the birds at heart. If the result could be restricted to the pests it is intended for, then nothing would be said against it, but we know only too well of the havoc such practices play with our useful natural fauna. It behoves us all to be ever on the alert and do our best to prevent this inhumane and wanton destruction.

Shooting and Trapping.—The latter, we are pleased to know, is under supervision of the Commonwealth for all practical purposes, for a strict oversight is being kept on all exportations, consequently if people are prohibited the export of birds, very little trapping will be practised. The shooting of game birds by sportsmen need hardly enter into our consideration, for I am sure that with the enforcement of the game laws the birds will be able to hold their own. Under the heading of shooting must come the almost infinitesimal number of birds, when compared with the whole, that are taken for scientific purposes by the various museums and private collectors. If any really serious thought is given to this matter, it must be acknowledged that no appreciable difference in the number could possibly be the result. Surely all will agree that it is very necessary that all possible information respecting rare or fading species should be carefully collected while yet there is an opportunity, for it would be a crying shame to allow any particular species of bird to become extinct before learning all that is possible about it. If we cannot hand down the bird alive, we can at least preserve its natural history.

This compilation of facts respecting our fauna is constantly growing, and in Australia we have some very competent men who are ever publishing additional data. But if we analyse the various publications we will find most of them are made by persons who have made their own private collections or are made by persons who had access to private collections. Further, it may be said that the material in museums consists of from 30 per cent. to 50 per cent. of material collected by persons not in the employ of the museums, so that if private collecting is prohibited it will to a very large extent be the end of the ever-increasing valuable information that is being collected. We are turning our effort into the wrong channel when we seek to prohibit collecting so as to save our disappearing fauna. Let us look the thing squarely in the face and tackle the problem in the correct and only feasible manner, viz., by preserving the natural habitat in large areas.