

# The Fauna Preservation Society

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## EDITORIAL NOTES

*The Duke of Abercorn.*—We record with great regret the death of the Duke of Abercorn. His Grace had been a vice-president of our society since 1927.

*British Mammals.*—Members will in this number, see and we hope enjoy, the new section on British mammals. As every issue will in future contain this section, it has been found necessary to increase the price of *Oryx* to 3s. 6d. *Oryx* will of course still be sent free to members.

*India.*—A report upon the first session of the Indian Wild Life Board was given in *Oryx*, Vol. II, No. 1. This all-India board has already been followed by the setting up of State boards in Assam, Bombay, Mysore and Saurashtra. Mr. E. P. Gee has sent us an account of the first meeting of the Assam Wild Life Board held at Shillong on 9th and 10th September, under the chairmanship of the Minister of Forests.

Among the legislation discussed was the Rhinoceros Preservation Bill, which is to ensure the greatest possible protection for the great Indian rhinoceros, the state emblem of Assam. The Assam National Parks Bill, not quite ready, was put back until the next meeting. It was decided to approach the Government of Bhutan, through the Government of India, to seek its co-operation in the creation of a sanctuary in Bhutan, on the north side of the North Kamrup Wild Life Sanctuary in Assam. Steps taken to improve the Kaziranga and North Kamrup sanctuaries were also discussed—we learn that Rs. 39,000 was spent by Assam last year on Kaziranga and that Rs. 18,000 is being spent this year by the Centre on the same sanctuary.

The protection of wild life outside the reserve forests was studied, and it is this aspect of the wild life of India that has caused the greatest concern in recent years. Close seasons, the issue of guns for crop protection, revision of the fees and conditions for gun licences, the sale of buckshot and changes in the shooting rules were fully considered.

It was agreed that wherever possible, buffer zones in which human settlement would as far as possible be prohibited, should be maintained around sanctuaries. All cattle and

buffaloes allowed to graze in the vicinity of sanctuaries should be compulsorily inoculated against prevalent diseases, in their own interest and in the interest of the animals in the sanctuary. A veterinary dispensary should be opened at Kaziranga. Lastly, the Board discussed and made recommendations for publicity and education in wild life matters.

Assam goes ahead.

*Northern Rhodesia.*—We read in the 1952 report of the Game and Tsetse Control Department of the danger to the "controlled area" scheme. Controlled areas were introduced to protect the game by excluding all but a strictly limited number of visiting hunters. The hope was that the residents in their own interests would limit their hunting to the level which the game population would stand. In many controlled areas this hope is not being fulfilled and the game stocks are dwindling rapidly. The new draft ordinance provides for the restriction of residents' hunting as well as that of visitors.

Mr. D. M. Cole, Editor of *The Northern News*, has sent us a headline cutting from his paper, giving details of the conviction during October of three Europeans on a total of seventeen counts of contravention of the game laws. The charges included hunting game by night, using a light for hunting, possession of unlicensed firearms, and possession of ammunition without a permit. The culprits were fined a total of £292, and a 7 mm. gun was confiscated.

We are glad to see that the Court took these breaches of the game laws so seriously and are grateful to Mr. Cole for the publicity which he has given to this case.

*Australia.*—We have now received the full account of the surveys carried out by the Fauna Protection Panel of New South Wales into the distribution of the brush turkey and the Australian bustard.

The brush turkey population seems to vary inversely with the amount of timber cutting. When that starts the turkey disappears; if it is stopped the turkey, aided by its large egg clutches, re-establishes itself. In one instance where latana infested the standing scrub and stopped felling operations the turkey multiplied. Other factors detrimental to the brush turkey are the man with the gun, although the bird is completely protected by law, foxes, goanna lizards, which eat the eggs when hatching, dingoes and native cats (*Dasyures*).

The brush turkey has certainly decreased and of course the chief reason is the spread of settlement. There seems, however, no immediate danger of its extinction. It inhabits the

coastal area between the Queensland border and the Hawkesbury River.

Very different is the situation of the Australian bustard, which has decreased enormously in the past fifty years. Early in the present century the bustard seems to have been common in the central and western divisions of New South Wales. Flocks of as many as sixty birds are still seen west of the Darling River, but elsewhere single birds or pairs only. Only one instance of successful breeding has been reported in recent years.

Once again the primary reason for decline is the destruction of the birds' habitat by settlement, but unlike the brush turkey, the bustard because of its shyness and slow breeding can hardly recover. Although protected by law, the Australian bustard is still hunted for sport and food. The fox, introduced to reduce rabbits, has also helped in its decline by destroying young birds.

In Western Australia, too, the bustard is in grave danger, for it is now plentiful only in the Kimberleys and in parts of the north-west pastoral country. Completely protected legally since 1935, it is still being shot, though the culprits are mostly people passing through the country—local people appreciate the birds' value as a pest destroyer. This year the Fisheries Department, which administers the Fauna Protection Act of 1950, is making a determined effort to stop illegal shooting of bustards, and an appeal for public co-operation has been made by Mr. A. J. Fraser, the Chief Warden of Fauna.

We hear, also from Mr. Fraser, that the numbat or banded anteater, *Myrmecobius fasciatus*, is believed to be far from nearing extinction. If at any time reports show that the species is in danger, immediate action to protect it will be taken. It is a very shy nocturnal creature, rarely seen.

*New Zealand.*—In the journal of the Forest and Bird Protection Society of New Zealand we read, under "Aliens in the Forest", of the wild cat and the opossum problems. The wild cats of New Zealand are descended first from cats deserted when sealers', whalers' and prospectors' camps were abandoned and later from cats liberated to control rabbits. Now they are probably a serious hazard to the continued existence of the ground nesting native birds. We say "probably" because cats have been present so long on the main islands that all the harm they can do to birds there may be already done. Cats destroy not only birds but rats; elimination of cats now, in places where they and the remaining birds may be beginning

to reach a state of balance, might cause a great increase in rats and disaster to native ground-frequenting birds.

No finality is claimed for this argument. It can apply only where long-established cat and rat populations are present. On the few remaining cat-free islands no immigrant mammals must be allowed to become established.

The opossum, more properly called "phalanger", was introduced from Australia to establish a fur trade and until 1946 enjoyed legal protection. *Forest and Bird* calls it a good Australian but a bad New Zealander. The destruction it was causing to forests was at first not realized because of its being nocturnal and a tree-top feeder. Now the opossum is recognized as the most serious of forest pests and has a price of 2s. 6d. upon its head.

*Alaska.*—We hope soon to publish an article from Dr. F. F. Darling who has recently visited Alaska with Dr. A. Starker Leopold on behalf of the Conservation Foundation of New York and the New York Zoological Society. The object was to make an ecological reconnaissance of the big game situation, with reference especially to caribou and moose and the condition of their feeding ranges. Dr. Darling also took part in the 1952 annual census of the muskox on Nunivak Island in the Bering Sea. Seventy-five were counted but nine others probably missed.

Commenting on the muskox article published in the last issue of *Oryx*, Dr. Darling is very reassuring about the goodwill of the Eskimos on Nunivak Island. He writes that they are co-operating in excellent spirit with the officers of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service, who praise them highly as guardians and observers of the muskox. A difficulty with the Nunivak muskoxen seems to be their tendency to go out on the sea ice in the spring. When the break-up comes they are swept away and eventually drowned.

Regarding the carrying capacity of the island, Dr. Darling pays tribute to the work of L. J. Palmer, but thinks that were he alive to-day he would not hold to the figures of 8,000 reindeer and 2,100 muskoxen. The conclusion reached by Dr. Starker Leopold and himself was that the reindeer should never exceed 5,000, and that more than a few hundred muskoxen could not find food.

Finally Dr. Darling adds that the United States Fish and Wildlife Service hope eventually to restore muskoxen to some portion of arctic Alaska. In the meantime Nunivak is the obvious place for keeping them; probably the stock will slowly increase.

*The Polar Bear.*—Following the note in the last issue about the polar bear in Norway, we have had a disquieting report from Mr. Frank Illingworth upon its position in North America. Mr. Illingworth says that its numbers are being reduced by irresponsible slaughter, due among other causes to the new meteorological stations established in the Arctic, and to the numerous expeditions now being sent to the extreme north, both privately and by governments. Air bases and landing strips have also disastrous results for the bears. He has often heard it said “ You cannot come back from the Arctic without having shot a polar bear ”.

The necessity for the protection of the polar bear—clearly an international matter—was brought to the notice of the Executive Board of the International Union for the Protection of Nature at the recent meeting of the Union at Salzburg. The Union is undertaking an investigation which will we hope result in steps for proper protection.

*Flamingos.*—Mr. Arthur Vernay has kindly sent us a copy of a letter from Mr. Robert Allen upon the progress of the flamingo colony in the Bahamas. Compared with last year, 1953 has been a poor flamingo year. There was a huge assemblage at Inagua during late April and early May, when two nesting colonies were started. Then for no apparent reason the excitement waned, nest-building halted and most of the flocks moved back to winter quarters. By the beginning of June only one nesting colony of about 1,200 flamingos remained in occupation.

The reason for this sudden change is not known. The wardens have worked splendidly under great difficulties; the flocks have been successfully guarded, and there has been no disturbance.

Strangely enough the flamingos on Bonaire Island, in the Netherlands Antilles, where protection is as rigid as at Inagua, had a similar experience this year. In fact only two flamingo colonies were known to be actually breeding in the Caribbean area, the Inagua colony in reduced numbers and that at Yucatan. This nesting failure must not be regarded pessimistically; 1953 was simply an off-year for the breeding of the rosy flamingo.

Mr. Robert Allen gives the following account of the birth and first days of a flamingo chick :—

“ From the moment that I could see the first pipping of the egg it required about fifty minutes of squirming and struggling on the part of the chick before it had worked its way

out of the shell, and lay there altogether exhausted and utterly hopeless looking. Throughout this period the parent flamingo stood nervously on the nest rim, watching closely but apparently unable to assist in any way. Some parents seemed more distraught than others, and one large bird that I took to be a male, stepped off the mound again and again, walked away a short distance and then came back again, looking about and uttering a low, rather dismal call. But all the births that I watched were successful; in three or four hours the chicks had dried off and were trying to sit up and beg for food.

The first meal consists of a regurgitated liquid that is efficiently passed from the almost closed mandibles of the parent into the partially opened bill of the young flamingo. Then bits of the egg shell are fed, doubtless to supply calcium for the rapid growth of the chick's bony structure. During the first three or four days of life the youngster stays close to the nest. It is brooded much of the time by one or other of the parents, who appear to share the rearing of the chick at this phase, as they had shared the arduous business of incubation. When they are able to stand and beg in earnest the young flamingos are delightful little creatures. They are sturdy tots with straight bills that look more like young geese than anything else. They are covered with a soft down that is white or grey in tone; their thick rather short legs are red or pink. They stand up on the top of the nest mound, heads raised and bills open, agitating their stubby wings and probably uttering a small begging note, though I was unable to hear this. The parent stoops over in an unbelievably graceful posture and touches the little mouth opening with deft tenderness.

Sometimes a brooded chick will poke its tiny head from beneath the wing of the parent and beg. Contorting its long neck the adult finds the open mandibles of the young one and thus gives it a meal, as it were, in bed."

To glance at flamingos in another part of the world. Some time ago we received a report of the rifling of the nests of a colony of the greater flamingo (*Phoenicopterus antiquorum*) at the Enbagai Crater in the Serengeti National Park, Tanganyika. It was found that the damage was mainly done by children of pastoralists of the Arusha and Mbulu tribes. This has been stopped and frequent inspections are being made to ensure that the flamingos are left to breed undisturbed.