

THE MENACE OF THE GERMAN OWL.

(By HUGH ROSS, of Invercargill, Junior Member.)

"Whooll," the haunting cry comes through the night, causing us to look with apprehension at the grey shape perched on the gate-post, a score of yards distant. As we look he ruffles his feathers, bobs his head, and suddenly bursts into cries like whistling laughter.

Little grey killer. That same cry strikes terror to the heart of any small birds within hearing. Again, yet again, does he call. Then on noiseless wings he begins his night's hunting.

The damage done by a single owl in a few nights is almost incredible. Every nest in his hunting ground is robbed. The nests themselves are torn to pieces, the eggs, and probably the luckless mother birds devoured. It is the native birds that chiefly suffer. There are ten times the number of owls in the bush than the number that haunt the farmyard trees. Little wonder, then, that for a while the smaller birds were on the decrease. I say for a while, because about 1925-26 the owl appeared to have it all his own way, while the smaller birds rapidly disappeared. Now, however, the owls, in this and other surrounding districts, have practically disappeared, while the native birds have increased.

As an example of the damage done by these grey killers, the following facts will show only too plainly why we should do our best to exterminate them. Three years ago, a pair of grey warblers that were always to be seen about the fruit trees of the orchard, nested in an old pear tree, the nest being very well hidden. A pair of silver eyes at the same time built in a hawthorn hedge close by. They, unlike the warblers, took little or no pains in hiding their nest. It was built on a branch projecting over an old drain; and could be seen at quite a distance.

For a while all was well. I think there were young birds in the warblers' swinging home. The silver eyes were brooding on their eggs. Then, one night, the melancholy cry of an owl was heard. For three nights he haunted the orchard, in that time robbing both nests. The fourth night, to the vengeful crack of a gun, he toppled from his perch on the ridge of the barn. Neither warblers nor silver eyes were ever seen again.

This owl is quite fearless of man, and will approach to within a few feet of him. Some time ago, I was returning home just at twilight, when I was startled by the cry of one close by. A glance round showed him perched on the branch of a dead tree, within twenty feet of me. I threw a stone at him, but instead of taking fright he darted in pursuit of the missile. Doubtless he took it for a moth or some such insect. A half-dozen or so stones he treated in a similar fashion. It was not until one