

BIRDS THAT SEEK MAN

KEA AND WHISKEY-JACK: A CANADIAN EXAMPLE.

THE company of birds, or even of a bird, can mean much to a man in the wilderness. Lives there a mountaineer with soul so dead that he does not welcome the Kea's company in the snowy wastes of the Southern Alps?

Greater loneliness and isolation than the New Zealand bushman or mountaineer usually knows fall frequently to the lot of lone trappers leading an individual existence deep in the Canadian wilds at midwinter. On the winter hunt a Canadian trapper may be alone for long periods in a white world where only his brains and energy stand between him and death.

Wild Creatures' Company.

"High pressure activity," writes "Grey Owl" in his "Last Frontier," "keeps the mind from the black abyss of introspection." Birds and other small inquisitive wild creatures help.

"A man so much alone looks kindly on the numerous small birds and animals that congregate around his cabins and camping places. Squirrels that eye him knowingly from the eaves of his roof, chattering and quivering with some violent emotion the while, are tolerated till they become a pest. Ermine are suffered to enter the camp at will through some hidden crack, to flicker noiselessly around in flashes of white, bobbing up almost simultaneously in widely separated places, thus giving the impression that there is more than one, or giving the impression that they are able to appear in two places at the one time.

"Chickadees in little flocks chirrup their 'don't give a darn—don't give a darn' to him at every step; and—trail companion that sticketh closer than a brother—the whiskey-jack commits unpunished his numerous depredations."

Stealing for Cache.

"This whiskey-jack is a small bird, about the size of a blackbird, and he has more mischief in his small body than there is in a whole bag of cats. He is a scamp, but a likeable rascal. He mocks the call of other birds. He steals bait, or any small articles left round the camp. He loves human company, and at the first smoke of a campfire, he appears mysteriously

from nowhere, like a small grey shadow, and perches on a limb, generally right over the trapper's lunch place, knocking snow down his neck or into the cooking. He whistles a foolish little song, supposed no doubt to charm the hunter into giving a part of his meal. This the whiskey-jack generally gets, but does not eat, carrying it away and 'cache-ing' it. So the whiskey-jack is never full and stays until the last morsel has disappeared."

Trapper Tolerates Bait-Thief.

"A lonely man cannot resist the little bird's begging. As he gets fed, the bird becomes bolder." The bird may even snatch an opportunity to steal out of the lunch bag. If shoo'ed away, he knocks snow down the trapper's neck. Following the trapper round his traps, the whiskey-jack unbaited each freshly baited trap as soon as the trapper is out of sight. Mile after mile of trapline is followed, and the bird never gets full, as he "caches" the meat.

"Grey Owl" adds: "A man alone for months is glad of their company, in spite of the trouble they make; and for me their friendliness and cheerful whistling have brightened many a lonesome camp-fire."

Why is not this toleration of the whiskey-jack extended to the kea? If a Canadian trapper can tolerate sharing his food and trap bait with a friendly bird, must New Zealand sheepfarmers necessarily make war on all keas for the alleged fault of a few, and must the Government aid and abet this bird-murder in the interests of a few farmers who are altitudinally out of bounds?

What conservation needs most is to rid itself of the blind spot which balks sensible management. Mere protection, and more and more re-stocking where not needed, will never assure a proper abundance of wildlife. Without a favourable habitat, proper food and cover, and the application of sensible management, we shall never attain our goal of a well rounded conservation programme.—Seth Gordon in "Country Gentleman."