

# CONSERVATION OF FOREST AND BIRD.

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## WHENCE AND WHITHER?

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**Y**ES! Whence have we come, and whither are we heading in conservation of such natural resources as forests, native, and useful imported birds, game birds and trout? New Zealand has seen the introduction of birds and animals and later a war against them as well as against many species of native birds ever since the inception of Acclimatisation Societies. The initial object of these bodies was the importing of English birds in order that the early settlers might see their homeland birds and hear their songs. The common sparrow was brought in to protect vegetable crops against hordes of caterpillars which welcomed the new food, and the birds' success won glowing tributes.

Eventually, these Societies directed their efforts almost solely in the interests of rod and gun enthusiasts. Yet the ancient guess-work practices go on. A species of game bird is introduced experimentally in the hope (too often a vain hope) that it will be able to survive without a suitable habitat in which it can find the essential needs of life—cover and a routine of food supply to carry it in health and strength throughout the year.

The steady decline of native birds, game birds, and fish is, of course, accompanied by the usual cycles of waves of periodical temporary increase or decrease in numbers of a species. When a decline is in progress weasels and other enemies are blamed, but never the shootist or an insufficient cover or shortage of food. When trout shew a marked decrease some native bird such as the black-billed gull, caspian tern, black-backed gull, or shag is usually blamed. The fact that very few species of these latter birds ever frequent rivers is ignored. A shag is a shag, whether protected by law or otherwise. Whether it is a rare species and found only in a very limited range in New Zealand and nowhere else in the whole world does not matter to its relentless, ill-informed destroyers. The mere fact that it is a shag brings sentence of death. At the same time the very people who advocate the killing of shags and destroy them, vaunt their love for our native birds.

Acclimatisation Societies have robbed river-frequenting cormorants of a large part of their hereditary food supply by introducing trout which destroyed most of the native fish. Many trout enthusiasts now wage war on all shags, which surely have a right to live in their native country, and which did live in association with fish for ages upon ages without causing any depletion of the fish inhabitants.

Verily, in this matter many sportsmen are behaving in a most unsportsmanlike manner. They are forgetful of the fact that if all fry lived to become mature fish there would be more fish than water.

Fish, like other forms of wild life, are dependent upon food and cover. A remarkable phase of the observations by anglers on the decrease of trout is that the rapid destruction and damaging of native forests in recent years has not been given due weight. The forest on watersheds decides and controls the nature of the river beds, the spawning grounds, cover, food supplies for fish, and fish-food. Thus, things have drifted on haphazardly ever since the inception of the existing system or lack of system.

The superficial opinion of laymen—only too often biased by their personal pleasure or profit—has been preferred to the intelligent judgment of observant naturalists such as H. Guthrie-Smith and others. The findings of the highest authority on the native plant life of New Zealand, the late Dr. L. Cockayne, were foolishly ignored when he first warned the country about the deer menace. Nay, despite his warning, these forest destroying nuisances were bred and distributed throughout the land with the result that to-day New Zealand is faced with a vast national problem, the gravity of which few realise.