

VANISHING KITE.

A PREDATOR THAT IS WANTED BACK.

THE British kite, like the New Zealand shag, is a bird of prey. The British kite was once abundant, as our shag still is. But owing to the policies of man—not merely his direct enmity, but the changes he has wrought in the British countryside—this century has seen the numbers of kites that nest in the British Isles reduced almost to vanishing point. “The nesting haunts of the kite in Britain are now confined to about half-a-dozen pairs in the wooded dells of Radnor and Brecon in mid-Wales.”

To prevent the little Welsh colony of kites from dying through in-breeding, some English naturalists paid peasant egg-collectors in Spain to send to England fresh eggs from the nests of Spanish kites. To make this experiment succeed it was necessary:—

- (1) To keep close watch on the Spanish kite nests so that the eggs should be taken when fresh, and before being incubated by the bird.
- (2) To turn the collected eggs regularly, so as to keep them fresh.
- (3) To avoid packing them on end.
- (4) To send them to England by the speediest means—that is, by air.

In 1934 thirteen kite eggs were conveyed from Coria to Seville, where a German air service took them to Madrid and Barcelona, after which Air France took charge of them, and the eggs flew to England. But that was the last flying they were destined to do, because the Spanish senders had broken condition No. 3 (do not pack on end).

Other batches of kite eggs arrived in good condition in 1934 and 1935, and were placed in the nests of Welsh buzzards, where some of them hatched out.

So far the result of this attempted reintroduction of the kite is uncertain, particularly as the Spanish war prevented the collecting in Spain from being continued after 1935.

Is it not better that we New Zealanders should allow the shag to remain unmolested in

his natural home—he is a much older New Zealander than we are—than reduce him to one in-breeding rookery? Perhaps a future, wiser generation will spend much money and labour in reintroduction experiments if the present generation of gunmen does succeed in decimating our shag. But the lesson of the British kite is that predators have their purposes, and that, in dealing with native birds we should leave well alone.

“The laws of Nature (writes ‘Bird Lore’) demand the sacrifice of life that it itself may live. If we attempt to control the numbers of those animals which prey upon other animals we should ourselves become the greatest of destroyers. If we favour one form of life it is probable that we shall do so at the expense of other forms of life. It behoves us, therefore, to use our power with extreme caution, always remembering that it is far greater for evil than it is for good. We can destroy where we cannot create.”

In “The Natural Enemies of Birds” Forbush states: “Natural enemies of birds are necessary and desirable as they tend to maintain within proper bounds the number of species on which they prey; organised attempts to increase the number of birds over large areas by destroying indiscriminately all natural enemies are undesirable; under certain circumstances enemies which have been able to adapt themselves to man and his works and have become unduly numerous may require reduction in numbers; individuals of useful species which may become particularly destructive should be eliminated.”

“To those who know a bird’s spirit it is plain that a mere suspension of hostile action on our part would have the effect of altering their shy habits, and bringing them in crowds about us. Not only in the orchard and grove and garden walks would they be with us, but even in our house.” —W. H. Hudson.