

## GLIMPSES OF BIRD LIFE

(By Waitua.)

## BIOLOGISTS, POETS, AND THE AVIAN TRAGEDY

**J**UST as the little green silver-eyes (we used to call them blight-birds in the North) come again and again to the flower-covered "tree lucerne" tree outside my Wellington window (June, 1940), so I delight to make frequent visits to a book on birds; reading a little, then stopping to meditate on the thoughts suggested. A bit of fact here. A bit of argument there. A Nature book is as full of reflections as a tree is of flowers.

The Fifth Bulletin of the International Committee for Bird Preservation (hereafter referred to in this article as the Bulletin) has a formal bookish appearance, but inside it abounds in bird life. Birds had a world itinerary long before Cooks Tourist Agency. Birds could have told Captain Cook many things he did not know. It is said that the flight of birds gave the first idea of the location of that dip or saddle in the Otago mountains called McKinnon's Pass. Birds were pathfinders long before man. But man's discovery of their tracks and their timetable has been ruthlessly used against them. The stopping points on the pilgrim's progress of migratory birds are adorned with traps and with guns, even with machine guns.

"Decimated during migration." This expressive phrase occurs here and there in the Bulletin. Of the Grey Lag Goose (*Anser anser*) Sweden, in its section of the Bulletin, reports: "It is said that the flocks that leave in the autumn are more numerous than those returning; they have thus become decimated during the migration. The New Zealanders and the Northern Eskimos are said to share between them the responsibility for any decimation in the returning godwits. Perhaps the easiest way would be to blame the Eskimos, because they will not hear the accusation. It seems to be waste of time to blame New Zealanders, who hear but care not.

From this New Zealand reflection one returns to the Bulletin and its hard facts. Sweden throws a curious light on the feeding of mallards during winter, a common custom of the Swedish public in mallard-inhabited localities. This winter feeding, it is stated, "saves the mallards from the dangers of migration, and

has greatly contributed to the maintenance of the stock of this species. The fed birds become very tame." Feeding birds for their winter-maintenance, or to save them from migration risks, is one thing. Feeding them in order to tame them to look down gun-barrels on the 1st of May is quite another thing, and is an activity of which no New Zealander can be proud.

Another New Zealand activity is the war on certain New Zealand birds that are predatory or that are merely believed to be predatory. Norway reports in the Bulletin renewed efforts "to put an end to the excessive persecutions of various birds of prey; the Norwegian poet, Carl Schoyen, especially has stepped into the breach to defend the eagles of Northern Norway."

Where is the New Zealand poet who can use his art to help his native birds? The poet, the artist, and the cartoonist can all render aid.

And what of the scientist—what of the biologist? Writing to the Bulletin as Chairman of the New Zealand Forest and Bird Protection Society, Captain E. V. Sanderson reviews the white man's war on native birds and plants. "Acclimatisation Societies find guilty, and sentence to death various native birds; yet biological research (Captain Sanderson states) is practically unknown."

The societies possess all the serene self-confidence of the half-informed. Half-truths are their ammunition; and general biological ignorance prevents the half-lies (the reverse side of their half-truths) from coming to light.

Australia too reports a biological research deficit. In the Australian section of the Bulletin one reads that in studying the problem of the diminishing numbers of certain species: "Australia's chief need is a small biological department attached to each State Government. So far the matter has been left to private bodies and individuals."

In a country like Australia, composed of six Federated States, with a Federal Government, or seven Governments in all, it is difficult to secure parallel action by the Governments. But in New Zealand, with only one Govern-