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WILD LIFE AND WAYS

(Written for "The Listener" by Dr. R. A. FALLA

Director of the Canterbury Museum)

A SESSION with a broad general title like *Wild Life* can be made to accommodate matters of topical interest ranging from the earth in space, through tectonic structure and rock constituents to a consideration of the various aspects of plant and animal life. Quite a lot of "ologies" are involved in this, and ideally a panel of trained and experienced "ologists" should plan the course and deal with the questions. But the Brains Trust technique is not easily maintained over a long period, and so we have in practice the one-man talk session, conducted by someone who seems to know all the answers and expounds them with the authoritative tone of an oracle. What he has really done, of course, is to refer his questions to reliable source-books, or even to digests when in a hurry; or better still he may have discussed them with good-natured colleagues, if he is lucky enough to have any.

As recently as a century ago there were natural philosophers who could keep up with the growth of knowledge in all the fields of science, but to-day the canvas is too vast and the fields too specialised. The writer or radio speaker on popular science is often on thin ice and needs to skim with wariness and proper modesty. I had always thought that this fact was generally appreciated and it has been one of the greatest embarrassments of slight radio publicity to find optimistic listeners who can and do still write to the effect that "having listened with interest to your recent talk on comets, we feel sure that you will be able to tell us if hedgehogs milk cows."

More seriously, however, an analysis of the queries in some hundreds of letters shows that there is a widespread interest in nature and in the ways of the wild. It is universal enough to merit an even larger share of radio programme features than it gets at present, although there have been some very good offer-



DR. R. A. FALLA

"There is a limit to the value of looking and listening"

ings of the kind lately in both national and commercial programmes.

In our film fare, however, there seems to be both a lack and a lag. No doubt "supports" are relatively unimportant in the estimation of box-office returns, but they cannot be entirely negligible. I have often wondered if there is any method of recording the response made by an average audience in the various support items that are sprung upon them in the first half, for it has seemed to me that the well-produced nature films that occasionally appear get a spontaneous and good reception. There is skilful editing in a film like the New York Zoological Society's *High Over the Borders* which makes it exhilarating as well as instructive, and the same may be said for some recent British films. With *Tawny Pipit* graduating from support to main feature a new era may be in sight. Lately a volcanic eruption and forest fires have jolted the National Film Unit out of a rut of industries and social services, and it is not too much to hope that the depicting of yet more aspects of nature in New Zealand may be an important part of the post-war projects of a service that has shown itself energetic in other fields.

From Looking to Doing

If, on the whole, then, the wild life information service shows such signs of flourishing, the consumer public has little to worry about. But there is one danger, the danger of indigestion, and that for want of exercise. There is a limit to the value of looking and listening, and the whole value, culturally speaking, of nature fare in the public programmes depends on how far they are successful in turning lookers and listeners into doers. Compared with older countries of large population, New Zealand is imperfectly explored in a biological sense, and is still at the stage when an intelligent observer who is not a scientist can contribute useful and even valuable observations.

Last but not least is the personal pleasure to be derived from it. I am not at all sure that I want to spend time writing articles instead of getting out and doing more field work, but the editor has suggested that listener-readers might be converted into observers by a few articles on wild life topics. So this, by way of introduction, is the first of them.

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