

# GRAND COUNTRY FOR BIRDS

I MUST modify what I said a week, or two back about the scarcity of birds in Queensland. Every day now I see something new: today the beautiful red-backed sea eagle, with its arresting white head; yesterday a dozen fork-tailed kites; a few days earlier a flight of pelicans; every morning the fascinating Willie wag-tails; and one day when I was beyond the bush in the western plains, vast flocks of galahs and cockatoos.

I don't know how Queensland compares in this matter with other Australian States, but its bird population is far bigger than ours, more striking to the eye, and with a few exceptions more interesting to watch. I suppose it is true that we lost our birds in New Zealand largely because they were too innocent to look after themselves, having had no enemies but man from the beginning of time, and man only for a few hundred years. But I think it must also be the case that warm countries are easier for birds than cold countries unless they lack food supplies. Australia before the white man came was a hungry continent for mammals, but it can never have been hungry for birds, whether they were carnivorous, insectivorous, vegetarian, or all three; as so many birds are. I remember how surprised I was a few years ago when Ernest Adams, who had used a gun in both countries, told me that it was easier to get a limit bag of ducks in Victoria than in any part of New Zealand. I had

supposed that our heavier rainfall necessarily meant more feeding grounds and more birds, but now that I have seen some hundreds of miles of Australian coast, the tidal rivers, the shallow lakes and lagoons, have considered what frosts do to insect life in New Zealand, and what steaming heat does in Australia, I realise that water birds of all kinds have a much easier life here than they do with us, and must always have fed better than ours and multiplied more freely.

THE dingo fence I mentioned in an earlier note was more than a farmers' hope expressed in miles of wire-netting. Tenders have been called this week for 1426 tons of wire, and the State Cabinet has decided that the first section of the fence, a stretch of about 1800 miles, will be completed within

JULY 28 twelve months. This will involve "topping" about 1000 miles of existing fence, and persuading landholders to accept £8 a mile to keep their boundaries dingo-proof. Wire and wire-netting will be supplied free where fences exist now and have only to be converted from barriers against rabbits into barriers against dogs; but to enclose the 16½ million sheep it is proposed to protect against dingoes will take about three years. It is, however, clear that the work will now go on, and I find it good for me as a New Zealander to hear Australians using such figures. I can't think off hand how long the coast line of the South Island is, but I have a suspicion

that an 1800-mile fence would just about enclose it.

IN the meantime dingo hunting seems to be a lucrative occupation for those who are both experienced and lucky. One of the newspapers reports a case this week where a "dogger" on a station near Longreach, 450 miles west of Rockhampton, earned £294 in ten minutes by destroying two

JULY 29 bitches and 12 pups in a single burrow. Although the Government bonus is only £1 a head, the landholders in this area add £20 for every dog destroyed. There are, in fact, landholders who argue that this is the cheapest, and the only sure method of exterminating the pest, since the area to be enclosed by the dingo-proof fence will be 1000 miles long and 500 miles wide, with as many breeding grounds on one side as on the other. It is their argument and not ours. But what the dingo fence means first of all would seem to be that Australians have paid too much for listening to that argument in the case of rabbits to be deceived again with dogs.

I AM finding it almost as hard to get rid of dingoes as the farmers in Queensland's mid-west. But this question is asked in a farmers' weekly: If a

sow can produce 25 piglets at one birth is it possible for a dingo bitch to produce 16 pups in one litter? Most of those who accept the first figure reject the second.

It seems to be definite enough that 16 pups were found in the same burrow, 15 alive and one dead. The question is whether they were left there by one bitch or by two or three. If they had more than one mother it is strange, graziers say, that they were all of the same size and of the same rather unusual colour (chestnut red). I would myself think it strange, since dingoes are dogs, that two bitches should have shared the same burrow at the same time for the same very private purpose. But farmers would sooner believe that they might than that dingoes should be capable of multiplication at that sensational rate. It is known that dingoes will shelter temporarily in the same burrow, bitches, pups and all, but in the case that started this controversy there were no bitches and the pups, it was estimated, had all been about the same time without food—long enough for one to die. One mother could have been poisoned, trapped, or shot, but it would be pushing coincidence a long way to think that two mothers gave birth on the same day, suckled their families for the same time, and then died at the same time.

No one can solve this problem. If, however, the single litter argument is right, twice as many sheep as now seem doomed will die before there is security for the others. (To be continued)



ROYAL SPOONBILLS ON NEST

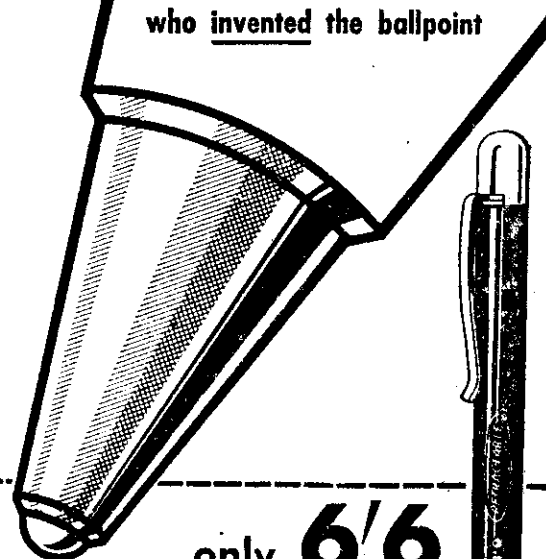
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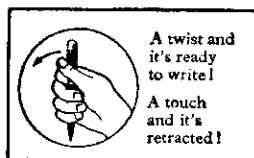
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