

# Birds Underfoot, Birds Overhead

by "SUNDOWNER"

HERE is a simple experiment which I am too sceptical and lazy to carry out myself. I know, however, that some of those who do try it will get results—if New Zealanders are still what I found them to be in my first seventy years.

Cut an acre of fern at the height of its growth in summer. Rake it into a heap and leave it to rot. Next summer apply it as a mulch to your tomatoes and strawberries. Then stand back and watch them grow.

If your faith is feeble ponder over this extract from a contribution to a recent issue of *The Countryman*:

When I applied it as a mulch to my strawberries, roses and tomatoes the results

were spectacular. The side shoots pruned from my tomato plants in the greenhouse and dropped on to the thick mulch took root; strawberries showing the pinkish leaf of starvation on poor soil had leaves of brilliant green in two or three weeks; and a hybrid tea rose with which I experimented reached a height of eight feet in a couple of seasons.

It all happened because the contributor had read that bracken cut in July (January here) and rotted down contains twice as much potash as farmyard manure. It can happen again. New Zealand has 1,453,214 acres of bracken guaranteed equal to Best British.

I HAVE hardened my heart against our hens, which refuse to learn how to use their liberty. Now instead of ranging free between daylight and breakfast time, and from about 2.0 p.m. till bedtime, they will stay imprisoned till three

the side of the orchard on which I find it easiest to fork out the grass. Nor have I the time or the patience to put my head out of my bedroom window every morning to shoo the pullets out of the garden, or to retrieve my boots afterwards when shooing is not sufficient.

But if there is to be reform in the hen-yard the first aid to reform will have to be a higher fence. I have, in fact, started to erect it, and after digging eight post holes in the sun on a clay bank, tarring the posts and ramming them in, each nine and a half feet long, sawing my way through the fowl-house wall and hanging a new door, I realise that it was my hands I should have hardened and not my heart. I also begin to understand, as I write this note in bed next morning, how the authors of my only volume on anatomy were able to write 1388 pages about our muscles, nerves, bones, and skin.

AS I write this note three starlings are moving a heap of cut grass (dry) from a path in the garden to a hole under the iron above my head, and two sparrows carrying some to a nest in a cabbage tree overhanging the starlings. I think sparrows prefer trees to spoutings and starlings spoutings to trees, but in this case the sparrows were in the roof first and were driven out by the starlings. Why there are three starlings

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I don't know. It may be two males paying court to the same female, and hoping to impress her with their diligence, or there may be two nests. In that case, however, where is the fourth worker? And why do they all work feverishly for ten minutes or a little more, and then disappear; sparrows as well as starlings; to arrive with straws from another direction after I have decided that work has ceased for the day, and that I can delay clearing the spouting till tomorrow? Last spring I watched a sparrow near Alexandra pulling straws from a dead but still standing weed on the roadside and returning every five minutes or so for more. It was a tough weed, the name of which I did not know, and the sparrow was sometimes quite unable to strip off the piece she wanted. She would tug, twist, and pull, let go and then try again; but she did not give in. If she found one stem impossible she would move to a piece higher up and take that away. Why was she so fastidious and so persistent? There were softer, drier, easier straws all about her, but she was not interested in those. She wanted those tough pieces, and though she seldom got more than a couple of inches at a time, that seemed to satisfy her.

The sparrows and starlings I have been watching this morning are carrying straws a foot long. They are collecting them as fast as they can deposit them and reload, but I can't see why the work stops suddenly and then, after five or ten minutes, goes on again. Do they take time off for refreshments; do a little love-making; or just rest? There is a change of weather on the way, with a rising wind that will eventually sweep away their now very handy supply of building material. Is that speeding them up a little, and at the same time tiring them out? I don't know. I have never been a patient enough observer of birds to speak of them with any confidence.

(To be continued)



Turnbull Library photo  
"New Zealand has 1,453,214 acres guaranteed equal to Best British"

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to hospital he does not return. His name . . . wait, wait, I have it . . . his name is Mr. Kendall."

Her eyes gleamed wildly. "Ow did you know?" The question rapped the quiet air.

"I work in the Post Office. I know everything."

She stared painfully, then a slow smile relaxed her face.

"Aw, go on with you. I told you before."

He smiled back and reached for his book. It was a good one, an escape story. The fire hissed softly in the grate, the room was filled with quietness and peace. But the painted koala bears and the little model boomerang stared and stared at the old lady, and the plaster kookaburras screamed at her in the silence. She leaned over and tapped the young man on the arm.

"Excuse me, but 'ave you ever been to Australia?"

or four in the afternoon—of course, without learning anything. If there were single words

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for the different situations I might compile a farmyard dictionary, giving the sights and sounds our animals recognise and the very small number to which they react as we wish; and our hens would have the shortest list. I was born in a gully, and one of the earliest calls I came to recognise was the "Chookay" of an Irish neighbour on the other side of the gully who called her fowls as often as she cleaned a pot. I think the fowls would have come if she had not called at all, as my two cows answer (and sometimes come) when I sharpen my scythe. But this woman had a big family and her days must have been short. I suppose she had discovered that a call plus a scrape brought a prompt response than a scrape only. She had no time for the undignified repetitions with which I try to hurry my cows to



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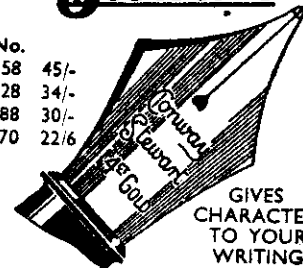
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