

# Rats and Blackbirds

by "SUNDOWNER"

I DON'T know whether it is the Transport Department or the owners of garages who are decorating the highways with warnings about the dangers of faulty brakes. Nor do I know who needs, and heeds, these warnings. The driver who starts knowing that he can't stop should not go to a service station but to a mental hospital. But I saw a

**FEBRUARY 25** car the other day plough into a mob of sheep outside a mental hospital gate. As far as I could judge not many sheep were injured; but the driver of the sheep was in a car too. I drove on wondering which driver should enter the hospital first. It is one thing to follow sheep in a car on a country road where the dogs don't lose their heads and delays cause no traffic jams. To follow them in a car through a busy street breaks every rule of courtesy and common sense.

But when that driver calls on the psychiatrist I have a suspicion that I ought to go with him. Calendars are not quite as dangerous as cars, but they can be just as difficult to stop. One entry

demands another; one creature calls to another; one comment provokes another, till all the restraints of discretion and indolence are as useless as hydraulic brakes without fluid. I should have read the safety warnings more carefully and refused to start what I had no certainty I could stop.

**WHAT** makes a cat catch a rat? It is a hungry cat that will eat a rat, a reckless cat that will play with one. Ours is a cautious cat, and very rarely hungry, but when I went out this morning she was lying beside a buck rat that

**FEBRUARY 26** looked formidable even when it was dead. Where she found it I don't know, since I have not seen or heard or come on the marks of a live rat for several years. It was black, too, or almost black, with long and coarse hair—what we used to call a bush rat in the North Island. But there is no bush within miles of this valley.

The last recently killed rat I can remember seeing was almost dropped on

my head by a hawk which, after struggling over a row of pine trees with something heavy in its claws, took fright when it saw me immediately below it and dropped its burden only a few feet from me. That rat was half eaten but brown, and I was not sure whether the hawk had killed it or picked up something left by a dog or a cat.

When every farmer grew grain crops, and stacks of sheaves were left standing all winter, rats were almost as numerous as sheep. It was one of the excitements of threshing to surround a stack with sticks as the last of the sheaves went up into the mill and the only chance for the rats was to escape while there was still some cover. A few always did escape, since a rat keeps his head when he runs away and watches where the blows are falling. When we used flexible sticks his chances were not good, but we usually picked up whatever was handy and I can still remember the frustrated feeling when I aimed a blow with a fork or a batten and the rat stopped just before I hit the ground. It surprises me that we ever kept them in check. But nowhere, as far as I know, have they been completely exterminated. If black rats are now rare—in most parts of the world, I think, except South America—that is not because man has killed them but because brown rats have stolen their food and their hiding places. In spite of the

food they eat, the property they destroy, and the diseases they circulate, rats have defied man for generations to add them to the lists of animals he will not allow to live.

A **NORTHLAND** correspondent wants to know "where our New Zealand blackbirds came from," why the cock bird never sings, and why its beak is harder and sharper than the beak of "remembered" blackbirds in England.

They are questions **FEBRUARY 28** for an ornithologist and not for a shepherd, but it would be mock-modest to refuse on that account to answer. I suspect that the important word in my correspondent's note is "remembered." Northland is a long way from England, and it may be—I do not know—that 1955 is a year or two past the day when the blackbirds of England were last seen. I find it difficult to believe that blackbirds could remain blackbirds in Europe for hundreds of years and turn into something else in New Zealand in 88 years.

But it seems to be established that blackbirds were reluctant to settle in Northland when the way there was first opened to them, and that they are still a little reluctant to stay. Guthrie-Smith and G. M. Thomson, perhaps our highest

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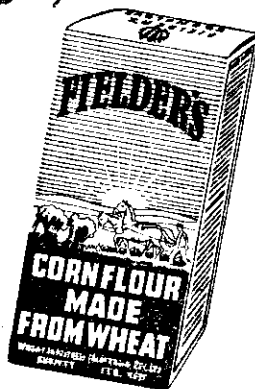


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