

# OF BIRDS AND BEES

by "SUNDOWNER"

I SEEM to be 20 or 30 years late in thinking that magpies don't like Otago's sabbath, or its climate or its soil or its grubs; and at least ten years late in saying so. They are overcoming their dislike. A Bulletin written by Professor McCaskill eleven years ago has been sent to me through the post, and it shows clearly that magpies were then moving south again, and had been doing so for some years. They were in Kurow, and the Lindis Pass; in Dunroon, Herbert, Hampden and Palmerston; they were nesting in pine plantations on Waikouaiti racecourse, numbered eight in Merton, and "up to a hundred" on, or in, or near Maungatua. Some of Professor McCaskill's correspondents were definite, some vague. Some could say when the first birds were seen, some when they were first reported. But there can be no question that when his Bulletin was written (April, 1945) magpies were living all the way down the coast from Oamaru to Dunedin. I can't doubt that they are still there, though I have never seen any of them, and that their numbers will increase unless farmers combine to destroy them.

But it is still true that Otago is not calling them very fast. A map included by Professor McCaskill to show their distribution throughout the Dominion has three big blank areas, the Waikato and Bay of Plenty, Nelson and the West Coast, Otago and Southland. Otago is not the biggest of these areas, but it is the biggest area of the kind of country magpies are supposed to like; and the blankest. There is the fact, too,

that magpies were once established in Otago and then cleared out. According to G. M. Thomson, they were nesting near Dunedin in the seventies. If we allow 20, or 30, years since they turned south again, there is a gap of 50 to 60 years in which they gave Otago a wide berth. If the reason was not Otago's sabbath, the sabbath of my youth there, when it was a sin to whistle on Sunday or read a daily newspaper, what was it that these tough birds found too trying? \*

TO help me not to take wasps too seriously a correspondent has sent me one of the science pages from the *Illustrated London News* containing an article by an entomologist who calls wasps peaceable creatures very much maligned. Though he admits that they can and do sting, he denies that they are aggressive and

MARCH 18 "turn savagely" on anyone who attempts to drive them from the marmalade on the breakfast table. It has, he says, been established by observation, that wasps "need the stimulus of the presence of their nest, possibly its odour, if their aggressive instincts are to be aroused." Cases of stinging in other circumstances are accidental or automatic: the wasp has been crushed "against a vulnerable part of the body," and "the extrusion of its sting is almost a reflex action."

It is certainly comforting to know that wasps do nothing to us if we do nothing to them; which is also true in general of bees. But is a bee sting less painful when the action is reflex? Bees are always dying or about to die when

they sting us. At that stage they have no more power to deny us a sting than they have to recover the sting itself afterwards. It is an accident when we tramp on them with our bare feet, usually an accident when we annoy them, always a reflex action when they retaliate and die. But does the lack of planning and willing save us from punishment? The friend who tells me not to worry about wasps says that few of us worry about bees, though this is what one did to him only three days before he sent me the page from the *Illustrated London News*:

I was foolish enough to persist in working in the back garden after being chased once. As a result I suffered what was literally a kamikaze attack. I was struck above the left eye, and 24 hours later began to swell up. It produced such an obscene effect that I had to lie low for two days or send children screaming in fright from me on the street. I looked like a fugitive from a horror-comic. No distinguishable features remained on the left side of my head except my ear. The eye disappeared and the contour of the jaw disappeared.

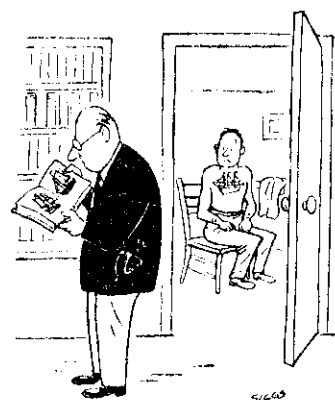
Why worry about wasps after that?

R.R.D.M. sends me this question from Northland:

Does your cow—if she were not surrounded by abundance of grass the action could not be observed—well then your imaginary cow, or some cow you have known or heard or read about—does she graze round a rich pasture in any consistent direction? Does she graze clockwise or anti-clockwise? If she grazes by the sun now did she graze the opposite way in England?

The question, so far as it applies to my own cow, is answered in R.R.D.M.'s parenthesis: we have so little grass,

MARCH 20 so little that looks like or tastes like grass, so little to lead a cow astray in any direction, that Betty regards me as Providence and turns right or left as she sees or hears me. If I bring her into the garden she pulls right or left according to the position of the forbidden fruit. If I feed her round the



(C) Punch

edges she keeps on the way I started her since there is nothing at all to tempt her but what lies ahead.

The question of course is, what would she do if she were free and surrounded by foot-high sweetness? What would my imaginary cow do? What do they do?

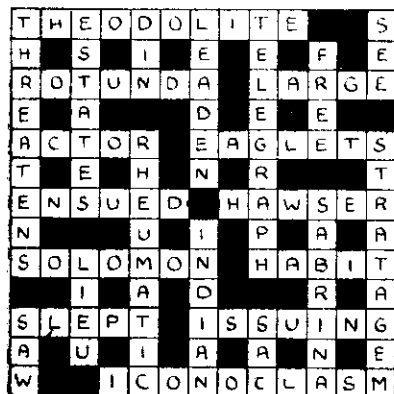
I can only say that I have never noticed or given the subject any thought at all. I have noticed some aspects of it: for example, that my cows, if they have the choice, graze uphill. They graze downhill when they are coming home, or going down one side of a gully to get up the other side, or see something below them that tempts them more than the grass they see above them. But when there is nothing else involved but direction and slope they feed uphill—I imagine because it is more comfortable for them to take grass down their throats than to draw it up, and easier to rest their heads above them and shorten the stretch of their necks than have their heads hanging down at full length, perhaps under some degree of blood pressure.

I am not sure what my correspondent means by "grazing by the sun." If he means grazing away from the sun or to it—that is in the line of the sun—or cutting across that line with the sun shining on the side of the animal and not on its head or tail, I have again no information, because I have never been bright enough to think of such matters and watch. But the contour of the country would have something to do with the answer, and the direction of the winds something.

I can't help thinking, however, that there may be a natural, I mean a congenital, right and left impulse in cows, horses, dogs, and all other domestic animals, which we sometimes cut across when we impose our own directions on them. Until machines came we always milked cows on the right side. Horses, when I was a boy, were always led from the left, saddled from the left, mounted from the left, approached on the left in a stall. Some became so left-sided that they resented interference from the other side—mounting, saddling or grooming. Some always pulled to one side of the road, if they could, when they were ridden or driven. Some sheep-dogs naturally cast to the right, some to the left, and get bewildered if fences or other obstacles, including topography, make the reverse way necessary. It is very likely, I think, that this is the same thing as left-handedness and right-handedness in the human animal, and that the best results come when training follows the natural impulse and does not drive against it. That, of course, is a mere guess, and everybody else's guess is as good as mine.

(To be continued)

(Solution to No. 793)



## Clues Across

- Normally the last word, but when followed by 24 across, becomes tractable (4).
- If you have indulged in drunken revelry in this way, you can take the soda cure (8).
- Strange mixture of stones (7).
- Upheaval of law in the beginning, but the result is strong and resolute (8).
- Mathematical reptile (5).
- Declaration of a part of speech and a binding agency (13).
- "And mighty — I am . . . that I am able to have a spare bed for my friends (Diary of Samuel Pepys) (5).
- The case is confused indeed; in fact, it's defunct (8).

## "THE LISTENER" CROSSWORD

- Sixteenth century French poet (7).
- Widest road in surroundings that couldn't be better (8).
- Cain's brother, although upset, is still clever (4).
- Just the material for a Mexican abode (5).
- This young member of the family will give you coins even if his purse is empty (5).
- C and Y? How sweet! (5).
- "How — the little busy bee Improve each shining hour" (Rev. Isaac Watts) (4).

## Clues Down

- Wander about, as the egotistical Cockney might have said about himself and his girl (7).
- Ann's keen to make these trousers (8).
- When it has been removed from the attics, these are left in some confusion (4).
- "Most friendship is feigning, most loving mere —" (Song from "As You Like It") (5).
- The darky's boss goes up in India (5).
- She's always in bed, I think; the lazy girl! (5).
- No more stars for them? How odd! (11).
- Or returned after the medical man in Asia for some delicious food (8).
- Run late? You'd never get there at all if you stay in this (7).

No. 794 (Constructed by R.W.H.)

