



Shepherd's Calendar

BACK TO THE WILDERNESS (2)

THE heavy infestation by rabbits of high, cold, wet, tussock and scrub country was something I had not expected. Although rabbits are among the most adaptable of all mammals I have never seen them take to cold wet country if they could find territory that was dry and relatively warm. But we never ran out of them in the scrub or in the tussocks, and they were as well established on the cold southerly faces as on those facing the sun. I thought they were slightly bigger rabbits than we grow on our warm low country, but that was probably an illusion. They are certainly less disturbed than low-country rabbits, but it would be contrary to all my experience of other animals if they grew bigger on a smaller and harder ration.

In any case, their period of comparative peace seems to be drawing to its end. Though they have always been subject to hand-laid poison and hand-set traps, those forms of attack have never proved really dangerous. But the new poison (1080) developed by chemists overseas and dropped on this country by planes during the last month or two has given destruction some terrors it has not produced before. Unfortunately for the run-holder danger to the rabbits is danger to his cattle and to his sheep, or the sky would rain carrots impregnated with a tasteless, odourless, invisible poison wherever there are open areas of ground on which the carrots would be discovered. We passed over a saddle on which, in less than half a mile, I counted 17 recently dead cattle, half a dozen dead sheep, and two dead pigs, and if we saw as many as that without particularly looking for them the total number of carcasses must have been very much greater. One indication of that was the fact that none of these carcasses had been disturbed by pigs, and that only hawks had found the dead

rabbits. There could be little doubt that the pigs in that area had died too.

AS far as I know the deer of New Zealand are not troubled by external or internal parasites, yet three of the six hinds I saw at close range had been wallowing. That may be a method of getting rid of their winter coats, or it may be a result of a moult induced in other ways; but it was certainly not an attempt to keep cool. It could have had something to do with annoyance by sandflies, which were active in spite of the high altitudes and low temperatures. But if sandflies worry deer it is round their faces and in their ears, and wallowing would be no defence against annoyance in those regions.

FROM deer it is an easy stage to goats, and on that subject I have to restrain myself. I like goats, and when we were shown a milking Saanen at Coverham we hardly knew which to admire most—the pure white kid, only six days old, which had learnt already to jump on the window-ledge and look at herself in the glass, or the quiet mother whose muzzle was always investigating our hands and our pockets and our buttons and our bootlaces. So

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be remembered on the Day of Judgment that although I later saw many goats, some with beautiful skins, and most of them within easy shooting range, I spared them all.

MY prime reason for this journey, as I have confessed already, was to stop the clock and confuse the calendar. In its way that monkey trick succeeded. I was old after my first day, very old after my second, but every day after that, with the help of the Lord and Patsy's tail, I felt better and better and better.

But in spite of ourselves we do more than that when we go back in our tracks after 70. We see changes, and we lie awake at night thinking about them. We forecast revolutions, and those too disturb our snores. Of those who accompanied me on my ride into that country in 1928 only two out of seven are now alive. Of the changes I thought I saw coming then—subdivision of the runs and intercommunication by telephone—neither one nor the other has taken place. Aggregation has displaced subdivision—I am compelled to think with advantage to the country as well as to the individuals—and the single line of telephone then standing has fallen down and not been renewed. The installation of a private transmitting system has brought the three main bases into daily but brief communication, and light aeroplanes take passengers and goods in half an hour from the coast to the farthest homestead; still a two-days' journey by riding horse, and three or four by pack train.

It is easy to think of helicopters, and to forecast a great increase in their use in such country; but it is safer to lie low and say nothing. If I knew beyond all doubt that rabbits would disappear in my lifetime I might feel bold enough to forecast other changes. But as often as I try to think of the last rabbit I see 17 two-year-old bullocks lying very still on a grassy saddle, and ask myself how much it cost the run-holder to reduce 100 or 1000 rabbits to the same state on the same day.

(To be continued)

