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SHEPHERD'S CALENDAR

A Plague of Grey Ducks

by "SUNDOWNER"

A READER has sent me this strange story from Blenheim—that farmers are fighting a losing battle there against wild ducks and have sent out an urgent call for help. It is some years since I last saw Blenheim, and I have never been there often enough to be familiar with its problems; but I find it as easy to imagine

OCTOBER 15 a plague of locusts in New Zealand as a plague of grey ducks. There probably was a time when ducks were as numerous in New Zealand as, say, wekas and wood-pigeons once were; but it was before I was born. Though I have once or twice seen ducks in hundreds, away from sanctuaries, and once or twice heard what sounded like hundreds at night, but was probably three or four dozen, my usual encounters have been with a single pair disturbed suddenly in a creek, with half a dozen pairs flying high, or with 20 or 30 individuals some distance from the shore on a lake and rapidly increasing the distance as they watched me. That is partly because I have never lived and not often lingered near swamps, but it is chiefly, I am sure, because the duck population of New Zealand has been small throughout most of my life.

But it is easy to be wrong about birds, big and little. I have had a letter this week from a Murchison correspondent who, after recalling my excitement when fourteen wood-pigeons were reported from Opoho, Dunedin, continues with this:

At this very moment as I sit on my verandah on this golden October afternoon I can count not fourteen but twenty-five pigeons within a hundred yards of me: fifteen in the plum tree, seven in the silver birch, and three flying overhead. Half an hour ago there were thirty-two. All this in the heart of the township, the plum tree being immediately behind the post office.

O to be in Murchison now October's there!

But Murchison is not all plum trees and pigeons. A brother who stopped there for a cup of tea last week, on his way home from Nelson, asked the young girl who served him if she had seen the satellite. This was her answer:

"How the hell can I see anything at night with those damn boys making all that noise?"

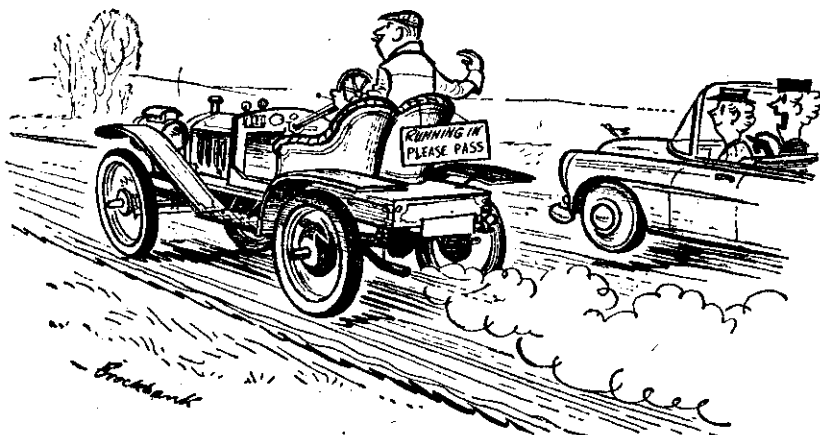
IN general I don't like whiteness in animals: white dogs, white cows, white horses, or even very white men. Like very white sheep, they seem to lack something; something in addition to pigment. But when Colin told me today that his cat had five white kittens I had to resist the

OCTOBER 17 temptation to ask for one. White kittens, I feel, are in the same class as white herons and white lilies: their lack of colour is their glory.

But it is, of course, sheer nonsense to think that colour in men or animals is more than skin deep. A white horse will travel as fast, and as far, as a bay or chestnut or a black. A white cow will give as much milk as a red cow, as rich milk as a black cow. A white dog is neither harder nor softer than a black dog, neither more intelligent nor less intelligent, neither more nor less faithful. There is, of course, a sick whiteness, most marked in men and sheep, as well as an accidental whiteness that is dangerous to survival in most environments: white rabbits, white starlings, white deer, white trout. But most of the objections to whiteness are ignorance and superstition. I was one of the first fools of my generation to bake themselves first into lobsters and then into half-blacks; but all we gained was an increase in vanity, excessive already and perverted, and the foundation of skin cancers. Napoleon's white charger was neither safer nor less safe than Lee's brown one, except in so far as it was a better mark. Donkeys run to whiteness, mules to darkness—with many exceptions in both groups—but everything in mules except their size and speed comes from their donkey and not from their equine ancestors. A white man is as tough as a black man, and neither of them is tougher or less tough, smarter or less smart, wiser or less wise than red and yellow men and intermediates, given the same environment and the same years of cultivation.

I HAD no sooner put my last hedgehog into a non-hibernating sleep, brushing aside the objections and ex-

(continued on next page)



"Golly, they've been a long time selling that one!"

(C) Punch

CBS.6

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