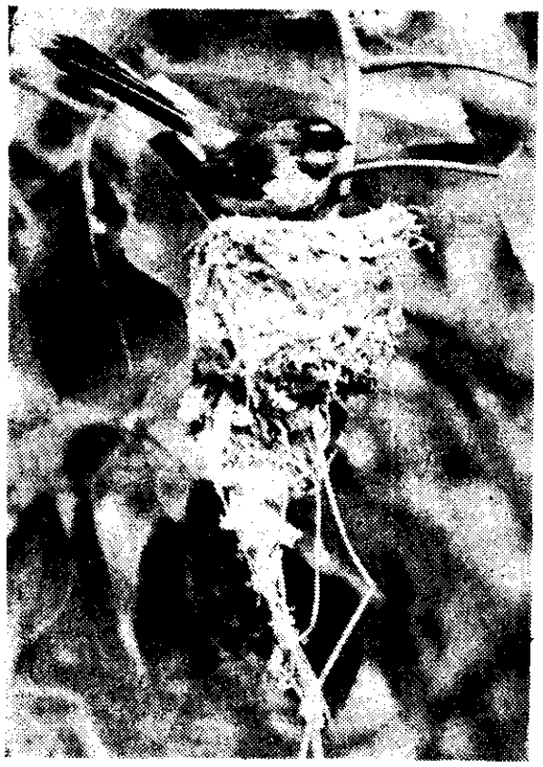
BIRD-WATCHING IN THE BACKYARD

I HAVE seldom seen an infertile egg left after a hatching of sparrows, starlings, thrushes, blackbirds, goldfinches or larks. It must happen oftener than we realise, since no one examines more than a decimal percentage of the nests in his neighbourhood. . . ."Sundowner," writing in *The Listener*, July 31, 1953.

DR. L. E. RICHDALE, the Dunedin ornithologist whose book on *Sexual Behaviour in Penguins* led to his being described in *Time* magazine as "the Dr. Kinsey of the penguin world," returned the other day from a two-months' visit to Australia. When he was passing through Wellington he had some interesting comments to make to *The Listener* about the gap in ornithological studies in this country on the life cycle and breeding habits of such common birds as those mentioned by "Sundowner" in the quotation above. Dr. Richdale, who for the past 17 years has been studying the habits of penguins, albatrosses and petrels on the Otago coast and on Whero Island, off Stewart Island, said that in many ways the study of the sparrow or thrush, or even some of our familiar native birds, could be more valuable in the long run than the study of penguins, albatrosses, and so forth.

"If I started again I'd take a common bird to study—the sparrow or thrush, or one of our common native birds like the tui, fantail, tomtit, grey warbler or bellbird," he said. "I would have more time with my subject, because the amount of travel and cost would be less, and I should be able to learn more about it. People seem to think that because certain birds are common everything is known about them or else that they're not worth studying. But if you ask yourself a few questions and look up a book or two you get a bit of a shock.

"It isn't really necessary to go to Spitzbergen or New Guinea or the Antarctic to study bird life. This study may be carried out by anyone who has the inclination to do so, man or woman, from his or her own backyard. A person living on a farm or in a house with plenty of trees around it would have the opportunity to study, for instance, the common house sparrow. If you are in a house with macrocarpa or pine trees around it the house and trees make a unit for study. A definite unit with a bird population which you can get to know over a period of years can be studied more intimately than an unusual bird in a distant and more inaccessible place which you can only visit for brief periods and at considerable inconvenience.



FANTAIL ON NEST
"There is a great deal we don't know about them"

"All you would have to do would be to catch your sparrows—trap them in the old familiar way with a sieve or basin propped up on a piece of stick with a length of string attached and a few crumbs scattered around. Once you have trapped your sparrows you band them with coloured bands so that you can recognise each individual. The ability to recognise them individually stimulates interest in the observer. You would then find all the nests, mark the youngsters as they were born, and go on studying the breeding habits and life cycle of the members of the unit for a number of years—say ten as the ideal number—to work the population right through and get a complete turnover."

Dr. Richdale mentioned two overseas examples of this kind of study which had been highly successful. One was a study of the robin redbreast, the common English bird which every child is told about as one of the first things learnt at school. No one in England had made a proper scientific study of this bird until an amateur ornithologist, a schoolteacher named David Lack, spent several years on it in his spare time. The result of his work was one of the most comprehensive studies of any bird that had been made. The schoolteacher, said Dr. Richdale, was now Dr. David Lack, F.R.S., head of the Edward Grey Institute of Ornithology at Oxford, where he was training his students to make similar studies of common English birds.

Dr. Richdale mentioned another example—that of an American woman, Mrs. Margaret M. Nice, of Chicago, who had observed intensively for eight years (while herself rearing five children) the habits of the common American song sparrow. The result was a remarkably well documented study of this bird.

Environmental Changes

Another question of interest to ornithologists was the degree to which English birds domiciled in New Zealand had changed their original behaviour patterns over the past hundred years. All animals and creatures changed their habits in a new environment, Dr. Richdale said, and the study of these changes was quite important to science.

A.P.N. photograph

DR. L. E. RICHDALE
No need to go to Spitzbergen

Dr. Olaus J. Murie, for instance, the American wild life expert who recently visited New Zealand, had come here to study the effect of change of environment on the American elk or wapiti which had been released in the fiordland district some years ago. A study was at present being made in Wellington by an amateur ornithologist of the common blackbird domiciled in New Zealand, but there was opportunity for much more research on the same lines.

Banding was necessary for an accurate record, Dr. Richdale said. "Although you might think that you recognised each individual bird when you saw it, banding is necessary for absolute accuracy and reliability in the results of your studies.

"It can pay to study common birds and animals at home," he said. "Such native birds as the tui, fantail, tomtit, grey warbler or bellbird we can recognise when we see or hear them perhaps, but if we thought a little more deeply and asked ourselves such questions as How long do they live? How long do they take to incubate their eggs? How long do the young stay on their nests? How long do the parents stay with their young?—we would find there was a great deal we didn't know about them."

IMMIGRANT STARLING
"It can pay to study common birds at home"

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wherever possible. The meteorological officer's job will be to advise where these can best be found. The engineer and signalling officers will be carrying out their normal duties, and the air quartermaster will cater to the needs of the inner airman. Within the limitations of the Hastings' galley a meal of soup, meat and greens, and fruit salad and ice cream, can be produced. Innumerable cups of tea will be required. These will play their part in helping the medical officer combat flying fatigue. This is a considerable hazard in long-range flying, and although the Hastings will carry three crews in the race it has been announced that oxygen will be used, even at relatively low altitudes, to prevent undue strain affecting the men's judgment. Special clothing will be worn to alleviate the effects of sudden changes of temperature, both in the air and on the ground. The weather will probably be fairly cool at each end of the route, but in the middle there are hot Middle-Eastern stopping places, and long hops over desert. "If you call New Zealand God's Own Country," says Mr. Wall, "you can have no doubt as to whose country South Arabia is."

There was to have been a compulsory check point somewhere in the Middle East, but this has now been eliminated and pilots may take any route they choose provided they produce evidence of having flown a south-easterly course between England and New Zealand.

The present England-New Zealand record is held by an R.A.F. bomber which flew to Ohakea six years ago in slightly more than 56 hours. Some of the handicap entries may not cut this time by much, but the first of the jets in the speed section should reach Harewood in little more than 24 hours.