

JOHANNES ANDERSEN on

Bird Life in New Zealand

Insect depredators—THE SPARROW and
other imported birds

A Talk from 2ZW

I HAVE said so much about the charm of the birds and the beauty of their song that it may be thought my championing of them is all due to sentiment; but I wish to show that the birds decidedly have their uses; they are much more than mere objects of interest or beauty.

What I say now is more particularly for the consideration of my many country friends, who usually have more against the birds than my town friends—as is natural, seeing that they are the ones who seem to suffer most from their depredations. If I speak now more especially of the sparrow, it is only because he is usually regarded as the worst offender; so that any consideration I can persuade my friends to show to him will automatically be shown to other birds as well—starling, skylark, and finches.

A great deal has been written and spoken about the harm done by the sparrow. I wish to say a few words about the good that he does; it is only fair to give both sides.

His misdeeds are made the most of in a pamphlet I recently received from America. He is said there to eat about twice his own weight daily. What would that be?—four or five ounces. It is also said that 50 sparrows can dispose of a quart of wheat in a day. Here is a definite statement. As there are 32 quarts in a bushel of 60lb., a quart weighs about 2lb.; this makes only three-fifths of an ounce per bird—a long way from twice its own weight.

HOWEVER, take it at a quart a day for 50 birds. The pamphlet leaves it to the reader to calculate how much this is in a year—365 quarts. As if the bird has the opportunity of taking grain right through the year! His opportunity does not last more than, say, three weeks, when the grain is ripening—that is, 50 birds take 21 quarts. Yet he must eat, so what is he eating instead of the grain? How many of his accusers can tell us? And when it is pointed out that among the grain eaten is the seed of weeds—thistle, fathen, wireweed, twitch, etc.—it is said that these weeds pass through the bird uninjured, so that instead of destroying the weeds he is spreading them.

A moment's thought will show the foolishness of such a remark. Is the bird likely to eat what he cannot digest and therefore do him no good? Have these accusers watched the

bird eating? Have they watched a caged canary? They do not bolt the grain like a fowl, but work the beak about quickly like a little mill, removing the husk and ejecting it, but swallowing the meal, which is digested.

The seeds of plants like elderberry are distributed, but that is because it is the pulp of the fruit—not the seed—that is the food; and so of other pulpy fruits; they are swallowed without the seed being cracked so that the seed is passed without injury; and all will have noticed how freely our native birds sow the seed of trees whose pulpy fruit they are partial to.

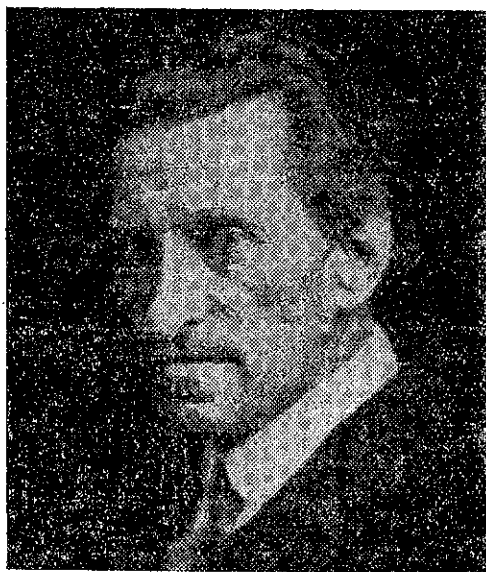
MOREOVER, the sparrow is by no means a grain-feeder only; insects of all kinds, creeping or flying, form his food, and during the breeding season his destruction of these is enormous, for his young must be fed on soft foods, composed chiefly of insects and caterpillars, and a certain quantity of soft vegetable food as well.

He usually has three broods in a year, five or more in a brood—say, 15 young in a season. The appetite of young birds appears to us to be astonishing until we think of young boys. On account of the higher temperature of their blood and their more rapid expenditure of vitality birds eat more in proportion to their weight than animals—and insects, it must be noted, far more than birds.

No bird is able to thrive on grain alone. Experiments have been made, and the food required is a mixture of grain, vegetable, and animal food; and in the case of grain-eating birds the animal food is insects and caterpillars.

The big, noisy New Zealand cicadas used to be the most destructive to trees, this being particularly noted by orchardists in the case of fruit trees. They made incisions in the bark where they laid their eggs, and these incisions caused wounds that never healed, the branch dying in two or three seasons.

This cicada was reduced and is kept in check largely by the sparrow. I have many times seen a sparrow capture one of these and fly off with him, the cicada still singing his song of sunshine, though the day of his sunshine was over. I have also seen flocks of sparrows systematically going over a grassed playing-ground picking out the grass grubs. This autumn I saw them in the Botanical Gardens removing green-fly from the rose bushes. The birds make good police to keep the insects in place. Is it generally realised how urgent is the need (*Continued overleaf.*)



—S. P. Andrew photo.

Johannes C. Andersen.

One of New Zealand's most prominent authorities on birds. Although he usually selects his subjects from the native birds, this talk from an entirely new angle will be found to be intriguingly interesting. We hope to hear Mr. Anderson before the microphone on some future occasion.