

ever they are it must be patent that to exist they must destroy a certain number of rabbits; and it is amongst the stops or breeding-places the ferret would be most useful as well as destructive, and under any circumstances it must be some years before they will be sufficiently numerous to balance the fecundity of the rabbit.

A great mistake is made by many owners when turning out ferrets. In some cases it is done without their being even hardened off or fed upon live rabbits prior to their release. In this case certain loss of the greater number inevitably occurs. Another error is turning them out in small numbers on ground thickly infested; in the latter case, the ordinary means of trapping or dogging is resorted to, and the ferrets, together with other natural enemies, are destroyed simultaneously with the rabbit. To be a success, or to give the ferret a fair chance, the country on which it is intended to turn them out should first have the rabbits reduced to a minimum; then the ferret should be released, and in any locality where the pest may again appear a few from the stock of ferrets on hand could be liberated to meet this increase; in fact, a systematic procedure is necessary to entail success.

Owing to the heavy losses sustained, and the unsatisfactory results obtained after arrival, the importation of ferrets has been discontinued, and the course of purchasing by Government all bred in the colony at so much per head adopted. The private demand for all procurable ferrets last year has been so great that only two or three lots were purchased by or offered to the department. Over 400 ferrets have been turned out on Government lands during the past twelve months: 384 in Otago, and 36 on the Napier boundary; there are still 184 at Government dépôts, and 112 were disposed of; 50 have been distributed to private individuals for breeding purposes on the usual terms.

Phosphorized grain is still the recognized means of really dealing with the pest, and more systematic methods are each year being adopted in this direction. The block system attempted last year is this season pretty generally followed, and with the best results.

No new methods of destruction that have proved effectual have been brought under notice during the past season. The great desideratum would be to ascertain some poison that would act as well in summer, when grass is green and plentiful, as the phosphorized grain does in winter. Could some attractive bait be discovered for the summer season the greatest part of the difficulty would be overcome, as then the work could be made continuous, instead of having only a certain season that can be utilized thoroughly with success, all other means during remainder of year being only moderately efficacious. In shearing and harvest time the difficulty of obtaining hands, together with the rapidity with which the rabbit increases at this season, to a great extent nullifies the autumn and winter efforts.

I would submit that, with a view of discovering some other means than phosphorus alone, upon which we now principally depend, a special branch of this department might be established, where experiments could be systematically carried out and reported upon. The expenditure need not be very great, and were good results obtained the benefit would be incalculable.

While referring to the various modes of destruction, I may state that I am not in favour of the use of large packs of dogs; one or two well-trained ones with the gun may be utilized, but, when the large packs are used, for every rabbit killed as many more are distributed over the country, stock are disturbed, often worried, and all natural enemies destroyed. It also tends to create and establish the professional rabbitier, whose interest it naturally becomes to conserve the means of his livelihood and destroy all enemies of his industry. Systematic poisoning in winter, followed up by the natural enemy, must eventually be the real solution, and, if poisoning could only be adopted in summer with same effect as in the winter months, the most efficacious method would be secured, and the professional rabbitier could be dispensed with; but, as long as a class are employed whose livelihood depends upon the pest they are paid to destroy, so long will they in their own interest farm this same pest for their benefit.

It may be worth while mentioning that the disease reported to have broken out amongst the rabbits is pretty generally distributed throughout Otago, but does not seem to thin their numbers to any great extent. I have procured samples of this from several localities, and to all appearance they are similar. By some it is said to be tuberculosis; by others a kind of liver-rot caused by parasites only visible under microscopic power. Inquiry into the matter is still being pursued, and will be duly reported. My own impression is that, although some disease undoubtedly exists, it is neither contagious nor virulent enough to seriously affect the question at issue.

In conclusion, I may refer to last season's work as attended, generally speaking, with satisfactory results. The diminution of the pest all through Otago, but especially in the Counties of Wallace and Southland, during the past two years, is most marked, and the general improvement throughout the colony satisfactory. A wet season certainly destroyed numbers of the young rabbits, checked their usual increase, and gave plenty of pasture for stock, yet the number of rabbitskins exported shows that the efforts made by owners in destroying the pest must have been greater than in former years. Consequent upon this reduction, the number of sheep are again increasing in what was at one time the country worst infested, and several of the abandoned runs have been retaken and stocked. Although the above information is satisfactory, it is apparent that the usual routine of destruction must be continued until some other more effectual means than those at our present disposal are discovered. The natural enemy is now generally admitted to be the only agent likely to finally solve the question, and I am thoroughly of that opinion myself. With the satisfactory knowledge that the pest has been largely reduced upon the occupied country, it must be patent that the huge areas of unoccupied waste lands fringing the West Coast, mostly unknown and inaccessible, will be a standing menace to the occupied country adjoining them, especially that portion near the provincial boundary of Canterbury, from Mount Cook to the head of the Rangitata. It may not perhaps be generally known that at present there are in Canterbury twenty-five stations on which there are rabbits, the largest number killed for the year on