

Removing Protection From New Zealand's "Butcher Bird"

NOTWITHSTANDING that the campaign for the removal of protection from the Australian magpie has been proceeding for over 15 years without success, the evidence against it continues to accumulate and proves conclusively that the remedy sought should no longer be denied.

A NUISANCE AND A MENACE

Under protection it has increased to such numbers in some areas, notably in the Manawatu, Rangitikei, Hawkes Bay, Wairarapa and Canterbury districts, that it has become both a nuisance and a menace, a formidable destroyer of our already sadly reduced native bird life, and a frequent attacker of adults and children. Undoubtedly it does good by eating grass grubs, etc., on pastoral land; but it is questionable whether the services it renders in this respect are not negated by its destruction of small native and imported birds which are insectivorous. As the late Captain E. V. Sanderson, founder and for many years President of this Society, declared in 1942: "NO WILD CREATURE OR WILD PLANT CAN BE SUCCESSFULLY INTRODUCED EXCEPT AT THE EXPENSE OF EXISTING FORMS OF WILD LIFE." This has certainly proved true in the case of the magpie, for it is an aggressive bird and devours its prey, particularly young fledglings which it seems to regard as a delicacy.

Though it has been pointed out before it is just as well that it should be emphasised that the so-called magpie in New Zealand is not a magpie. Ornithologists in Australia call it a crow-shrike, because it has the bill of a crow and the habits of a shrike. The Australian Butcher Bird is a shrike, and is thus named because it impales its victims on thorns or on the spikes of barbed wire. Whatever may be the habits of the magpie in Australia, it is evident that it has at any rate acquired habits in New Zealand that justify its being called "New Zealand's 'Butcher Bird.'"

NATIVE BIRDS THREATENED WITH EXTINCTION

"If we are not careful in a few years the only birds in New Zealand will be magpies and sparrows," declared Mr. H. M. Glazebrook at a meeting of the Hawkes Bay County Council. "I have seen the birds attack men. They take eggs, kill other birds, and chase dogs." He added that tuis were among their victims. In these remarks he was supported by A. W. Cooper Smith, who said he had seen magpies carrying off other young birds from their nests.

Is this sort of thing to be winked at? The North Canterbury Acclimatisation Society, which has taken a leading part for the removal of protection—it does not aim at extermination—has pronounced the magpie to be "an aggressive bird, increasing in numbers and destroying and displacing other birds, including beneficial native species. On the plains and near the rivers there has been a marked decrease of numbers of banded dotterel and black-fronted tern since the recent increase of the magpie. Banded dotterel are entirely insectivorous and were formerly most abundant on areas where the magpie alone is now seen. The black-fronted tern, in much reduced numbers, still accounts for large quantities of wire worms and grass grubs. . . . Near the bush the increase and spread of tuis, bellbirds and pigeons is almost entirely prevented when magpies are present: indeed, the natives are usually driven back."

At a meeting of the Wellington Acclimatisation Society, Mr. T. Andrews, Palmerston North ranger, reported that on several occasions he had counted flocks of magpies numbering 40 or 50. He was concerned as to what would happen when their food supply became scarce. He knew of isolated cases where the magpies killed new-born lambs; that sort of thing spread. One liberated pheasant, when it flew to open paddocks, was immediately horribly mutilated by three magpies.

It is not surprising that in these circumstances the Society is preparing a "dossier of crimes" by the magpie.