

A Plea for Some Unprotected Birds

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The list of unprotected birds in Schedule I of the "Birds and Animals Protection Act 1918-30" of New South Wales includes several birds that, to one understanding their habits, requires some explanation as to why they are there. First and foremost is the Goldfinch (*Carduelis carduelis*). This is an imported bird with nothing against its character, but which, on the contrary, performs a very useful rôle in feeding on the seeds of the Scotch thistle, a declared pest in most places. As is the way with all Finches, the bill is heavy, strong and of a conical shape for the express purpose of crushing the seeds it feeds upon, and that process is further aided in the gizzard by means of small pebbles and grit taken by the bird for the very purpose, so that the seeds are ground as in a mill first by the bill and later by the gizzard, thus assuring complete pulverization for digestion and assimilation. That process is in direct contrast with what takes place in the case of some other birds, notably Pigeons, and especially Fruit-Pigeons, which swallow small fruit and berries whole; the only part of them digested is the soft part, the stones and seeds being passed through the birds. That is one means of disseminating the fruit plant. The Goldfinch therefore actually destroys the seeds of the thistle on which few birds feed, the "Lowry" (*Platycercus elegans*) and the Rosella (*P. eximius*) and other of the ground-feeding Parrots and Quail being some of them. This is a decidedly beneficial action, for thistles are a great pest in some parts, whole areas being given over to them. The bird is not a fruit-eater. It does eat certain seeds of garden plants, however, but only after the flower has gone. The cosmea are plants to the seeds of which it is very partial. This, too, is beneficial, for otherwise the seeds would germinate in such numbers that they would become like weeds. These are its good deeds. I have not yet found its bad ones. It is a handsome species and a beautiful songster, all of which facts should warrant it a place in the totally-protected list.

It is difficult to understand how the Greenfinch (*Chloris chloris*) offends, for it was never in any numbers and in fact it is hardly ever seen now, although forty years ago it was fairly numerous about the western suburbs of Sydney, being seen only in pairs. I never saw it attacking fruit nor interfering with garden plants. Why it was on the unprotected list has always puzzled me. It is certainly a foreigner, but this is hardly enough to condemn it. I

would like to see it protected, especially as it appears to be on the down grade as far as numbers are concerned.

I was glad to see in the last issue of *The Emu* (Vol. XXXII, part 3, January, 1933) that the Government of Victoria had placed the Silvereye (*Zosterops lateralis*) on the totally-protected list, due largely to the influence of the R.A.O.U. This is as it should be. There can only be one opinion on the matter of its usefulness by anyone who has studied the bird at all, and I hope that the New South Wales members of the Council of the R.A.O.U. and others interested will put the matter of protection before that State's government with the view of placing the Silvereye among the totally-protected birds. New South Wales is suffering acutely at present from the depredations of insect pests in orchards and gardens, which has raised the expense of fruit-growing to such an extent now that it is quite unprofitable in many districts to grow fruit at all. The expense, for example, of spraying and other methods of insect destruction, which is the Silvereyes' special province if allowed to make it so, is very great; the bird does this much more whole-heartedly and is much more thorough in its methods because its living depends upon it. It is the best bird I know for ridding apple trees of woolly aphis, indeed for eating aphis of any kind; it is death to the codlin moth in all its stages, all small Lepidoptera, especially moths of the garden and orchard, either in the larval or mature stages. It is a fruit-eater, but we should not grudge it some fruit, knowing in what ways it is useful. In my district on the Comboyne Plateau the brushes have been largely cleared, and my orchard and garden are situated half to three-quarters of a mile from the nearest clump of trees in a small brush. It was difficult to grow anything on account of the insect pests, for the birds would not leave the cover of the brushes for the open. I had to wait about seven years before Silvereyes visited the garden, and they have been regularly every few weeks since. Needless to say, I welcome them and let them have all the fruit they want, for they have diminished the pests considerably, especially a very troublesome caterpillar, the larva of the cream-coloured cotton boll-moth (*Heliothis obsoleta*) which infests the flower heads, eating holes in the petals of almost every flower.

There has lately been a recent correspondence in the lay press (*Sydney Morning Herald*, Jan. 10-23, 1933) for and against the Bulbul (*Otocompsa emeria*), the native habitat of which is India and Burma. It was pointed out by several correspondents that it was greatly welcomed on account of its insectivorous habit, notably in destroying the caterpillar of the vine moth (*Phalænoides glycine*), which

feeds in large numbers on the foliage and young fruit of the grape vine and the foliage of the Virginia creeper, often denuding those plants completely of leaves, and which is a pest that few birds will eat, though the Cuckoos will feed on it. I have noted especially the Bronze-Cuckoos (*Chalcites* and *Lamprococcyx*) doing good work in this way. This fact is a decidedly beneficial trait and should merit some consideration. The Bulbul also feeds on other harmful insects of the orchard and garden in the shape of many moths, being a soft-billed insectivorous species. It does attack soft fruit and does a good deal of harm, also in the vegetable garden, but when one hears of its stripping the fruit of green vegetables, and buds, one must remember it is not done aimlessly. It may even eat tender shoots, but I think with more truth it is searching for harmful insects feeding in such places, for example, in the pods. I think it may safely be said that the amount of insects it consumes far exceeds the amount of fruit and vegetables destroyed, especially so as it feeds all through the year on insects and in the winter months entirely so, whereas for a few months in the year it has a mixed diet of fruit. Moreover, it is a handsome bird, the crest contributing largely to this, and withal has a pleasing run of notes.

The House Sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) and the Starling (*Sturnus vulgaris*) one can more readily understand being on the unprotected list, especially as they increase so rapidly, but even they have their uses as insect-eaters, and in some districts neither of them are fruit-eaters—I have had ample experience of that myself. They are not desirable birds for the way they build nests about the roofs of houses, for they, especially the Starling, are infested with lice and cause a lot of unpleasantness from those insects gaining entrance to the interior of houses. The Starling especially robs other birds of their nesting sites in holes and spouts of trees. The Starling here is decidedly beneficial as it feeds on ground insects all day long in the open paddocks and is a great destroyer of the cut worm. It never comes near buildings, nor have I seen it attacking orchard fruit, including my own.

The Sparrow is a scavenger, will take grain when it gets the chance, and in hot, dry climates it will eat soft fruit for the moisture it contains, as water may be hard to procure in the heat of summer. The Starling and the Sparrow have to be judged on their merits in different districts, according to their offences; in some districts they are both benefactors, feeding almost entirely on insects—in summer the grasshopper forms a large part of their diet, and they feed their young entirely on insects. Although on this plateau the Starling is increasing in numbers, the House Sparrow has not found its way here yet (January, 1933).