

What of our Raptores?

The National Association of Audubon Societies of America has a stated policy with regard to Hawks and Owls that could well be adopted in this country. One of the principal tenets of the policy is an opposition to the killing of the birds mentioned *other than those individual birds known to be damaging property*. Surely in the words in italics we have the crux of a position the essentials of which are logic and common-sense. A legal maxim that required what was known as "proof of scienter" before dogs and other animals could be assumed dangerous, has given rise to the saying that a dog is allowed one bite. We could well afford to allow our Hawks one chicken before condemning them for the crime of daring to flap their wings in the vicinity of our farms and homes. In a great many cases the farmer would retain the value of both his chicken and his cartridge. If Hawks are actually seen to do harm—and strict proof of that should be demanded, not secondhand tales and circumstantial evidence—then, unfortunately, they must pay the penalty. Some of our own pastoralist members have found that *some* of the Eagles and Hawks do become a nuisance in some respects, although beneficial in others. If an experienced man on the land finds them menacing his lambs or poultry and comes to the conclusion that an *individual* bird's depredations excel its benefits who can object if he terminates its ravages? But that or those individual bird or birds should be the limit of his activities. Why should he go gunning for every Hawk he encounters, because one or two have harassed his villatic stock? Why should the youth with a rifle and misguided zeal shoot the Hawk that flies over the land upon which he is trespassing merely because it is a Hawk? And if, and because, he does, why should he consider himself a public benefactor, and declare himself so to be if questioned as to his motive? Old ideas and deep-seated prejudices, often only equalled in their stupidity by the outlook of people who foster them, die hard, and still we hear tales of Eagles (much smaller than our Australian forms), the chief delight of which appears to be to decimate the population of neighbouring towns by carrying off children to their eyries. Newspapers continually publish photographs of shooters wearing self-important expressions that become inane and repulsive when one looks at the pathetic bundles of feathers, once majestic Eagles, that are nailed on to walls behind their destroyers. The captions explain that the "hoodlums" (although they refer to them in more genteel terms) have shot the Eagles at their nest "for rifle practice," or that a visitor to the district has shot a bird that had been about for some months, although there is nothing whatever to suggest that its presence was objectionable. The press gives notoriety to the most fan-

tastic tales from country centres and the public avidly consumes items that are often nothing but torpid trash, disdainingly, nevertheless to condescend to read the protectionist writings of some of our members, whom the same public consider "naturalist cranks." An example of the hyperbolic accounts that country correspondents serve up with their few shillings' worth of local news is that appearing in a Melbourne daily paper recently where an Eagle was recorded as attacking first a sheep, next a calf which it "also failed to carry off," and finally, with increasing audacity, a ferocious and fully-grown bull, which, the paper assured credulous readers, it severely mauled. One wonders why the bird did not then attack the alleged eye-witness before he departed to fortify himself with more of the material that appears to have inspired his account. These are the tales that the layman accepts as undeniable because the newspapers say so, but when it is pointed out that, amongst others, the Black-shouldered Kite and the Kestrel are beneficial, he shakes his head, calls the latter a Sparrowhawk and compliments himself on knowing better.

Even if the claims that Hawks should be killed, made by those who consider themselves public benefactors in prowling around others' property to indulge their mania for destruction, be admitted in the case of some species, how many are competent to distinguish Hawks and Eagles in the air? A most illuminating example of incapacity with regard to qualifications for destruction of raptores is indicated in the following, taken from *The Hawks of North America*, by John B. May, reviewed elsewhere in this issue of *The Emu*:—

"At a meeting of the best sportsmen . . . seven mounted specimens of birds were placed on a table and numbered. The eleven men present were asked to identify them without conversing with each other. The results follow:—

Name of Bird	Number answering		
	Correct	Wrong	Did not know
Cooper's Hawk	1	5	5
Sparrow Hawk	5	None	6
Red-tail Hawk	6	2	3
Barred Owl	2	3	6
Sharp-shinned Hawk	2	6	3
Red-shouldered Hawk	None	3	8
Cooper's Hawk	None	6	5

Cooper's Hawk appeared twice. The first specimen was recognized by one man only and the other not by a single man. . . . Of the eleven men five did not name a single one of the seven birds correctly. . . . These were real sportsmen; they had the birds in their hands; they were honest men; the birds are all common. . . . Does it seem likely that these men or other sportsmen could identify birds more nearly accurately if they were flying or if they were much farther away? Would these men be competent to destroy Hawks and Owls; or could the average sportsman be trusted to destroy them?"

A more pertinent observation is that out of a possibility of 77 correct identifications the total was actually 16.

Our Union is often accused of not urging bird protection actively enough. Let our individual members try and persuade others to consider the matter from the foregoing point of view. Many raptorial birds are essentially beneficial, others pay tenfold for the small tribute they exact. This is not intended as an abecedarium of Hawks and their virtues, because members should not need to be told of the potential value of the birds. But there is an amplitude of argument for their protection—their destruction of insect pests and rodents, their scavenging of carrion, their value in acting as a control against over-production of prolific species. Bear those arguments in mind and take up their cause, cajole others into doing likewise. Help to stamp out foolish and obsolete beliefs. Remember, as a basis of all argument, that destruction beyond individual birds proved to be damaging property, is unjustified, and extend your exhortations from that beginning.—4 2 36.

Some Random Notes on the Little Grebe

By R. T. LITTLEJOHNS, Melbourne, Vic.

My earliest recollections of the Little Grebe (*Podiceps ruficollis*) relate to individuals of the species which fell victims to the deadly pea-rifle in my hands or those of boys who roamed the bush with me. The memory of those occasions is hazy now, but I can recall our astonishment at the peculiar structure and plumage of the first bird we shot. Fortunately, our shooting was not often successful, as, even at that time, we had credited the bird with the ability to "beat the gun." Probably we succeeded in shooting only those individuals which disregarded their own safety in their anxiety over eggs or young. Although we were all keen bird-nesters the nest and eggs of the species were unknown to us.

It was after many years that I came in contact again with the engaging little bird and this time there was no pea-rifle to spread destruction. I had visited river flats near Melbourne on several occasions with Mr. T. V. Givens, for the purpose of studying the Fantail-Warbler (*Cisticola exilis*), without being aware that the Little Grebe was common in that swampy area. So there was considerable excitement one day when my companion announced the discovery of the floating nest of the species. It was moored to weed stems near the bank of a small swamp, and beneath the loose weeds on the top of the "raft" were five eggs.

Having learned some of the characteristics of the birds, it has been a simple matter during each subsequent year to discover several of the floating "rafts" in the weedy billabongs and swamps in the Yarra valley. The closest observations I have made of the species relate to a period when