

Domestic Cats Gone Wild versus Bird Protection.

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Ladies and Gentlemen,—To begin, and, if I may be permitted to use a paradox, this is no "Wild-Cat Scheme."

At Adelaide, 1905, or 18 years ago, I brought this important matter before our Union (*vide Emu*, V., p. 201). "The voice of one crying the wilderness." The only response came from far-away America. There they are confronted with a similar evil, and I was asked what were we "doing in the matter." My melancholy reply was: "Nothing."

Four years ago, at Perth, I again ventilated the subject of cats in the press. The scribes saw only the humorous side of the question. Result: Comic cuts about old A.J.C. having relinquished legitimate ornithology, and prowling through the bush with a blunderbuss—after cats.

Now to the business of this paper, and let me quote a few independent records* concerning cats. Gerald F. Hill, Naturalist and Explorer, writes (*Emu*, XV., p. 73):—"In 1909-10, while collecting in the far north-west of Kimberley, I was surprised to find cats on the mainland and adjacent islands, where they had been liberated, no doubt, from passing, or visiting trepang and pearling craft. During a more recent expedition across the continent, I frequently saw these animals between Oodnadatta and Alice Springs, and through the Western MacDonnell Ranges. They were seen again in the Macarthur and Roper River districts, across to the Katherine, and northwards to the coast. There are obvious and practically insuperable difficulties in dealing with this pest in the great areas referred to, but in the more settled states the economic value of our fast-diminishing bird-life should justify drastic action, or, at least, serious consideration of the subject which, as Mr. Campbell remarks, will have to be faced sooner or later."

These potent remarks by Mr. Hill were called forth by an article, "Missing Birds," notably ground parrots (*Emu*, XIV., p. 167), in which I state:—"Would it not be well for members to unite to protect, or to aid in the protection of some of the fast-failing forms of our avi-fauna. In point of fact, is not the "protection of native birds" one of the chief planks of the Royal Australasian Ornithologists' Union? I would suggest that a committee be appointed to report on the wild-cat question in connection with the destruction of birds." I now, formally, do so again.

*I could multiply many instances from personal experience, if necessary.

Take another Explorer's record:—"Fowler's Bay to Cambridge Gulf," by R. T. Maurice, a daring and successful trip across Australia, about which there were no pæans sounded as with the ill-fated Burke and Wills' Expedition. Maurice's report was simply printed by order of the House of Assembly of South Australia, November 11th, 1904. We read at page 24:—"Signs of them (rabbits) were seen so far as Lake Amadeus, but generally more domestic cats than rabbits were seen, and these animals are now distributed right through the continent and are almost as universal as the dingo." This was in 1901.

The Wilkins Australia and Islands Expedition, under direction of the British Museum, and at present collecting in little-known parts of Northern Australia, reported trouble with wild cats.

A clipping from the *Melbourne Age* reads:—"A number of Red Cliffs blockers have been losing poultry, and at first foxes were suspected. A watch was kept at one place, and cats were found to be the culprits. Numerous domestic cats have been taken from Mildura and left on the fringe of Red Cliffs settlement in the mallee, where they have gone wild."

All of you will agree that an animal that will tackle a rooster is a fierce monster when considered in the balance with the smaller native birds. What hope have they in life?

In an article, "Why the Birds Should be Protected," by Mrs. F. Hobler (*née* Miss Barnard, of Coomoooolaroo), in *The Queensland Naturalist*, IV., p. 21, that lady states:—"The domestic cat gone wild is another set-back to bird-life. What numbers of birds do they devour, and the young ones have no hope of escape. The quiet, old Squatter-Pigeon, which, at one time, was so numerous, is now almost a bird of the past—in the Central District at least."

The Commonwealth Government (through the Minister of Customs, and in pursuance of our resolutions carried at Adelaide last year) has appointed committees in the various States to deal with the export of Australian birds (and mammals). I know a little about the Melbourne Advisory Committee, which possesses the brains of the city, in its line. It has formulated the most stringent regulations to control the exportation of such animals as are regarded as being in danger of extermination. So far so good. But, to be logical, ladies and gentlemen, what is the use of such stringent measures for the few specimens which may be brought to ship board, or obtained for collections, when the fox and the domestic cat gone wild, are chewing up the same species wholesale in the bush? I ask again, what are we, as a Union, going to do in view of our chief plank being the "Protection of Native Birds"?

Let us get back to some of the propositions in my original Adelaide paper. Bring in, as soon as possible, a Cat Tax.

We have a Dog Tax. Why not a Cat Tax? One shilling per annum from owners of tame domestic cats—*i.e.*, from nearly every house in the Commonwealth, would yield hundreds of thousands of pounds a year, sufficient funds to combat and keep in check the wild cat nuisance in the country. Encourage Hunt Clubs (for cats), in which the Fox Terrier would play a prominent part.

Place the Domestic Cat Gone Wild on the Vermin Schedules, with rewards for skins, as is done with the fox and dingo. Moreover, cat-skins, if in good order, are of commercial value. When I was in Western Australia, I ascertained that in one locality cats were so numerous that a settler who required a rug shot only those animals which were black.

To conclude, fellow members, *if we are in earnest about the proper protection of our native birds—some of them the wonders of the world—we should face the wild cat pest now, ere it be too late, and before unique species, like the Night-Parrot, Scrub-Bird, and other ground-loving birds, have passed out forever.*

P.S.—The only opposition to the proposed Cat Scheme may come from a certain section of farmers, who state that cats kill numbers of rabbits, which they (farmers) consider a greater evil. That argument is not logical, for so do foxes kill rabbits.

Mention was made that cat-skins were of commercial value, that is, for export; there is no local trade yet. I understand that in America the skins are largely used for coat-linings, etc.