

## HOW THE AUSTRALIAN FAUNA IS FARING

By A. S. LE SOUEF

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Every country has its special problems regarding wild animal conservation. In Australia with its vast areas and sharply contrasted conditions these probably vary more than in any other land. We note that the country, like other parts of the world, is being rapidly occupied and it will not be long before all suitable parts are put to economic use.

A general survey of the position denotes that in a broad area round the coast, extending about three hundred miles inland, the larger animals, such as Kangaroos and also the arboreal forest dwellers, are holding their own, but that practically all the smaller things such as the Wallabies, Rat Kangaroos, Bandicoots, *Dasyurus*, and the native rats and mice, have disappeared. There are, of course, isolated spots where even these are still to be found, but with progressive settlement it is by no means certain how long they will remain.

We note that the game laws, wild animal sanctuaries, and national parks do not in all cases achieve their purpose as far as protecting the native fauna is concerned. Few of the sanctuaries are patrolled, and there is always a section of the population who will not obey the laws. Moreover it is impossible to curb the depredations of the introduced Fox nor prevent the more virile Rabbit, Hare, European Rat, and the exotic Mouse from occupying the heritage of the more primitive marsupials and native rodents, while destructive bush fires occasionally sweep over large areas destroying everything in their path.

Fortunately the mammalian egg layers, the Platypus and the Echidna, are perfectly safe; the former protected by its river environment and the latter by its barrage of quills which keeps even the predacious Fox at bay.

The quaint Koala, so-called Native Bear, because it is like one, has had a hectic career. The only enemy of this tree-living marsupial was the Aboriginee, who besides using it for food made its soft fur into string. They had not learnt to sew pelts together and make cloaks. The advent of the white man left the Koala comparatively free to make unmolested progress and it became exceedingly numerous. Nature then took her own way of dealing with the situation for the animals contracted a disease which killed them in thousands; they were

almost exterminated in the South-Eastern States. A severe drought in 1901-2-3 further aggravated the position, while the pea-rifle in ensuing years to a large extent prevented recovery. Survey showed that there were very few left. Strict protection since that time has allowed the animals again to increase, and now they are fairly safe. In one sanctuary, a peninsula, where the animals were free from all enemies, they became so numerous that the food trees were destroyed and many died of starvation.

In the absence of natural enemies Kangaroos increase in favourable localities and every now and again open seasons have to be proclaimed so that they can be reduced. This year—1946—abnormal snow falls in the southern Dividing Range, which is one of their strongholds, killed many.

The fertile rain forests of North Queensland, home of the Cassowary, Mound-building Scrub Turkey, Tree Kangaroo, Cuscus, and many smaller animals and birds, are rapidly being brought under cultivation and the interesting fauna seriously threatened. The tropics are beyond the range of the Fox, Rabbit, and Hare, but the introduced Wild Pig is making havoc of the ground game.

Tasmania is being steadily opened up, and the Marsupial Wolf, quite the most interesting of our native animals, is on the verge of extermination. An endeavour was made to capture some of the last remaining specimens, so that they could be placed in a safe place and allowed to breed. Two well-equipped expeditions searched for them in 1945-6. One only was located, but not caught. The Thylacine was destructive to sheep and a bonus was given for all destroyed, and this reduced them to the point of extinction. Their last remaining stronghold in South-Western Tasmania is wild rugged country and the animals are of course strictly protected, but trapping for Wallabies, which in that district carry valuable furs, is allowed. This not only takes away their food supply, but doubtless the Wolves are also caught in the deadly strangle traps and put out of sight.

In Central Australia, which is an unfavourable environment for the Fox, and islands off the coast, which it cannot reach, many small species of Marsupials and native rodents will doubtless hold out for a long time. The animals in Central Districts are adapted to live in semi arid country and to endure great changes in conditions. This is possible as the plants also must store up moisture, when it is available, and so they carry it through a dry season and the Marsupials, rodents and insects benefit accordingly.

Our bird fauna is being reduced in proportion as the environment is changed. The clearing of the country takes away the cover of the tree living species, but if sufficient shelter is left it opens the way for species living in more open conditions. The splendid Australian Crane, a close cousin of the wonderful Sarus Crane of India, and the Bustard, which is unfortunate enough to be called a turkey, are sadly reduced. Both these handsome and interesting birds can be looked upon as vanishing species. They nest on the ground and their young are very helpless, so they fall a victim to the Fox when out of reach of shooters.

Naturalists are glad to note that the Lyrebird is maintaining its numbers despite the depredations of the Fox and the Cat. This bird is undoubtedly the finest mimic of the avian world, and its display is a sight to be remembered by any fortunate enough to see it. Not long ago a recording outfit was taken into the forests at Sherbrook, near Melbourne, and its song relayed through the length and breadth of Australia.

The future of our fauna needs careful survey. Several of the smaller terrestrial species have already gone, and more will follow unless steps are taken now to place them in safety. We must consider what the effect of progressive settlement will be in fifty years time. Many species must, if we want to save them, be placed in a special breeding establishment, an enlargement of the well-run and successful sanctuary at Healsville in Victoria. Such a plan would serve two purposes, for threatened species would be preserved and there would be a surplus for distribution to zoological centres for exhibition purposes throughout the world.

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## GAME PRESERVATION (CEYLON)

By C. E. NORRIS

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The situation in Ceylon in regard to Game Preservation appears to be approaching the same level of depreciation as was experienced in America not so very long ago. The reasons in Ceylon are obvious; the main culprit being Man, the biggest enemy of Mother Nature. Man can destroy too easily, therefore it is up to him to reconstruct. He is the only living being able to use his mind and ingenuity to this end.