

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENCE.

(By L. GLAUERT, B.A., F.G.S., Curator of Perth Museum.

During the last few months I have received a number of letters, many of them accompanying specimens sent in, others in the form of an inquiry to which an answer was requested in "Our Rural Magazine." I have always been intending to answer these, but the pressure of business has always interfered. This time, however, I shall set to work, and I hope I shall not be disturbed before a lot of the questions have been dealt with.

Helen Prosser, of Middlesex, via Jardec, sent me an interesting note about a little animal she was keeping as a pet. She says: "It is an animal like a rat, and about the same size. It is nine inches long from the tip of the nose to the tip of the tail, the body is lithe and strong, and the tail is thin and short and covered all round with fine hair. It has strong hind legs, and the front legs are like arms with five white toes, the three middle ones with strong claws. The colour of the animal is brown and grey." There is no doubt that this animal is a young Quenda, one of our native animals which still appears to be very common, although not often seen in the daytime because it is nocturnal. Helen says that the animal will eat bread and milk and sugar, but that he does not care for green stuff. This is easily understood, because the animal is not a vegetarian. It feeds on insects, spiders, and other small animals which it digs out of the ground with its powerful fore-paws. The mark it makes is very different from the scratches of rabbits, dogs, or cats, for it goes down almost perpendicularly, and not at a gentle slope. I had one alive at the Museum for several years, and was very interested in its habits, so much so that a year or two ago I wrote a special article about the animal for "Our Rural Magazine." These little animals are often accused of doing damage in potato fields, but that is not true. They do not dig down to eat the potatoes, but in order to get at the grubs that are feeding on them. To test this, we once kept the animal without food for two days and then offered it potato which it sniffed, but would not touch. I was very much surprised on one occasion to see it attack a mouse and eat it up, skin, fur, bones and everything. You will, therefore, notice that the animal is really useful, and should not on any account be killed.

Ross Purser, of Bussel Brook, near Collie, has sent me a small animal which had been brought in by the cat. It is about the size of a rat, grey in colour, with a sharp and alert face and a long tail with a long black brush towards the tip. The limbs are almost equal, showing that the creature moves about on all fours, and does not hop like a kangaroo. This also is a marsupial, and although we have not been able to obtain a live specimen for study, the examination of its teeth suggests that it, too, is an insect feeder. In fact it is the attractive little Wambenger, a relative of the so-called pouched mouse, and fairly widely distributed in the south-western quarter of the State. In the early days of the settlement it was accused of entering poultry yards and killing young chickens. This may be so, but on the other hand it may be accused of doing damage for which the Chuditch or spotted native cat is really responsible. It was interesting to learn that the animal was brought in by the cat. Cats often go hunting in the bush and bring some little animals either for the kittens or for themselves. The winter is the period when this most often happens, and I hope that those of you who read this article and have cats will send to the Museum any little animal that they may bring in. Remember there is nothing to pay for carriage if the parcel is sent by train, and don't forget to put your name and address inside.

Another native animal has been sent in to me by Bernard Chapman, of Tralee, Lowden. This is a small relative of the Wambenger, known as the Dunbart, and is one of the many creatures which often receive the incorrect name

of Pouched Mice. It is about the size of an ordinary mouse with a sharp intelligent face and black beady eyes. It is mouse-coloured, and has a very long tail covered with fine short hair. This is another little insect eater, and is very voracious in its appetite. One we had at the Museum ate as many as fifty grasshoppers in twenty-four hours. It can be tamed quite easily, and will allow itself to be handled without offering to bite or scratch. It has the habit of standing hunched up, its little sharp nose peeping out in front and its legs looking like four match sticks, for the little creature has white feet and seems to perch on the tips of its toes. A fuller account of this animal was also given in "Our Rural Magazine" a little time ago.

From my very helpful young friend Eva Wills, of Southdale, I received a very interesting letter about that beautiful Western Australian animal, the Numbat. You will remember that Eva last year sent me a living animal which we were able to keep alive for thirteen weeks, feeding it all the time upon white ants, which seemed to be the only food that the animal would take. Being very interested in the Numbat, Eva has been keeping a lookout for them, and here is what she says about one little adventure: "Last Sunday we found four little Numbats but, unfortunately, we were unable to get the mother. We discovered them through our dog barking in a small hole, so we began to dig, and then my sister noticed the little Numbat in a log near-by. We caught this, and then began digging again. After digging along for about three feet we found that the tunnel suddenly widened from two inches into a large nesting place about nine inches in diameter, lined all round with fine dead silver grass, and in this we found three little Numbats as large as the little one we had caught in the log. We went back the next day, but the mother was not there. She had, however, visited the spot, for her footprints were all over the place where we had been digging."

Catherine Anderson, of Maryland, Bullaring, has sent me a very nice specimen of the large spotted Burrowing Frog, about which creature I have also written in the magazine some time ago. Catherine writes: "Some time ago you stated in "Our Rural Magazine" that frogs would be welcomed at the Museum, so I am sending you a consignment of four. Dozens of these frogs have their dug-outs round our house, and the concerts they hold at night are deafening. They do not all sing on the same note: some have high shrill voices and some soft and low, while one old fellow barks like a dog. Some years ago we had an English lad working on the farm. He complained bitterly that he could not sleep because of the birds; he had been up half the night throwing sticks into the near-by trees to drive them away. He would hardly believe it when we told him that it was the voices of frogs he had heard, not the song of birds."

Many of our frogs have powerful voices, and are usually regarded as musical, but I can understand people being disgusted if they lose their sleep night after night because of these frog concerts. If you have kept the back numbers of "Our Rural Magazine" you should read the article to which I have referred, for in it you will find described the peculiar breeding habits practised by some of our species who overcome the dry conditions under which they have to live.

From Miss Gwen Andrews, of Jam Vale, Borden, I have received a specimen of a lizard, together with an account of the conditions under which it was captured. Miss Andrews writes: "My three young pupils and I were looking at some interesting stones on a soap stone ridge when, accidentally pushing over one of the larger ones, we found, underneath, the peculiar lizard which I am sending with this letter. As soon as we uncovered it it reared up on its back legs and tail, hissing and looking fierce. We carried it home on a stick, and all the time it seemed to be trying to bite its tail off."

This lizard, often called the Barking Lizard, because the sound it makes is considered by some people to be more like a bark than a hiss, is found in the southern half of Western Australia, in South Australia, and Central Australia where it is fairly common, though not often seen because it is nocturnal in its habits. It is an insect feeder, and not at all dangerous. Its length, including the tail, may be six inches or more, the head is rather large with prominent eyes, the body somewhat flattened, and the tail heart-shaped. This extremity is easily shed, and in the majority of lizards seen the tail is fairly short, but the tip may be rather long and tapering to a fine point. The colour of the lizard is varied, being usually velvety black or brownish black with narrow yellow bands at intervals. The tail may be like the body and have a similar banding, or it may be reddish, peppered with black and without any other mark. It is a useful little creature, and in spite of its bluff is perfectly harmless. It is a great pity that it is so frequently killed by people who do not see through the bluff.

A striking little snake has been sent to me by Warwick Rich, of Richfields, East Wickepin. It is a small reptile about nine inches long with a dark brown head, a red body with narrow black rings which go round the reptile at close intervals from the neck to the tip of the tail. The shovel-shaped snout and the smooth body suggest to students who take the trouble to think about these things that it is a burrower, and in fact this little Ringed Snake, as it is called, is usually only found in sandy country, where it can burrow with ease in search of the underground insects upon which it feeds. It is extremely quick, and when disturbed will disappear in the sand like a flash. If the watcher remains still he may see the little head poke up through the sand some little distance away. If all is quiet the little snake will come out again, but if any move is made it disappears again at once. The snake is never as much as a foot in length, its mouth is small, and its fangs extremely tiny. It has often been handled without attempting to bite, and would therefore seem to be not in the least dangerous to man, yet the aborigines have a great dread of it, and will not go near it if they can help it. It seems to me that this is not so much due to the poison that the snake contains, but to its quaint habit of disappearing rapidly in the sand.

We often read that the leopard cannot change his spots, but we know that not all animals are so unfortunate. In our big cities ladies can change the colour of their hair or their eyebrows, and can give themselves nice rosy cheeks, but in nature this practice is so rare that when it does occur it attracts immediate attention. We all know that the strange foreign lizard, the Chameleon, is noted for this trick. Our Mountain Devil can also change within limits, and so also can some of our frogs, as will be seen from this letter which I received from Ethel Marshall, of Benalla, via Cranbrook.

"I am sending you two frogs, both of which we found changing their colour. One we found in a strawberry bush, the other was in a lettuce. When we put them into a white handkerchief the brown one turned white. When they change their colour the orange stays underneath their back legs, and the stripes of brown stay on each side of their body."

It is rather difficult to understand why the brown marks should remain, although we can guess why the red one should not disappear, for we know that in nature red is a danger signal and is an indication of some unpleasant property. Hornets with red or orange on their bodies are not nice to tackle, because of their poison stings. Brightly coloured butterflies are not eaten by birds because they have an unpleasant taste, and these red marks on the frog have been taken to indicate that it is not good to eat. I think some cats must learn all about this, for I remember we once had a cat that was fond of frogs, but when

it tackled those with the red mark it always left a part, and that was, I presume, the portion which bore the glands that secrete the unpleasant liquid to which the frog generally owes its protection.

In a second letter from Catherine Anderson, of Maryland, Bullaring, there is an inquiry concerning a twig covered with what looked like seeds. The twig was found under a manna gum tree. The "seeds" certainly looked like berries, but they were really not fruit but a kind of scale insect which occasionally infests trees in large numbers. These insects live on the juices which they suck out of the plant they attack, and they themselves often contain a sweet liquid. In fact, we have in the Museum some twigs obtained near the far-off Warburton Ranges, where they were gathered by blacks, who are accustomed to eat them as sweet-meats.

STORIES FROM THE FRENCH.

GIL BLAS AMONG THE BRIGANDS.

Part IV.

We passed close to Pontferrada, and prepared an ambush in a little forest which skirted the highway from Léon. From this spot we were able to see all the passers-by without exposing ourselves. There we were awaiting fortune's favour, when we perceived a monk of the order of Saint Dominic, mounted on a wretched mule—an unusual occurrence among these good fathers.

"God be praised!" cried the captain laughing. "Here is a splendid piece of work for Gil Blas. We shall rob this monk; let us see how he will acquit himself."

All the robbers were of the opinion that this was a commission admirably suited to me, and they urged me to make the most of it.

"Gentlemen," said I to them, "you will be pleased; I shall pluck this pigeon as bare as my hand and you shall have the mule."

"No, no," commanded Rolando, "the mule is of no account; all we want is his reverence's purse."

"Very well, then," I replied, "my masters shall see me make my debut; I hope that I shall gain the honour of their commendation."

So saying, I set out from the forest and galloped towards the monk, praying heaven to forgive me for what I was about to do; for I had not lived long enough among the brigands to view such matters with indifference. I badly wanted to make my escape at that very moment, but most of the robbers were much better mounted than I; and if they had seen me flee, they would have pursued me, and would certainly have recaptured me, or more likely they would have fired on me, in which case it would have gone badly with me. And thus it was that I did not dare to risk so hazardous a step. I therefore came up with the father and, pointing my pistol at him, demanded his purse. He stopped short to take stock of me, and without any appearance of fear addressed me thus:

"My child, you are very young, too young for such a wicked calling."

"Evil though it be, father," I replied, "I wish I had begun it earlier."

"Ah, my son," rejoined the good monk, who could not possibly have grasped the meaning of my words, "what is that you say? How blind you are! Permit me to show you the unhappy state . . ."

"Oh! father," I broke in, "have done with your lecturing, if you please; I do not frequent the highways to hear sermons; you must hand me over your money. Throw your purse on the ground or I shall certainly kill you."