

NATURE NOTES

THE TERN AND THE SCOTTISH FISHERIES COMMITTEE

THE recent condemnation of the terns, among other wild birds, by the Scottish Freshwater Fisheries Committee is fully in agreement with similar edicts made by some sportsmen and landowners with reference to the kestrel, raven, little owl and many other species. Well may Mr. Robinson enquire in last week's COUNTRY LIFE "on what authority did the Committee come to such a conclusion?" Personally I question if they had any reliable evidence relative to the food and feeding habits of these birds that would be accepted by any scientific or independent judges.

The Committee state (page 4) that "after further investigation" they are satisfied that—here follows a list of the birds—"are all without any doubt most destructive to young fish and the larvae and flies on which they feed." I should like to ask, and I am quite sure that a large section of the general public would be interested in learning, what further investigations have been made, what was the nature of these, and by whom and where were they carried out. I would further remind the Committee that the gravest doubts exist as to the birds they mention damaging the young of freshwater fish; and the statement that they feed on the larvae and flies on which the young fish feed is contrary to all known facts.

To include the beautiful sea-swallows in their sweeping condemnation is perhaps the worst of all, for apart from their extraordinary loveliness, most of the species are none too plentiful, and even the common tern has seriously decreased in numbers in many parts of the country owing to the fashion of ladies wearing its wings in their hats.

Mr. Robinson as a field naturalist of long experience and practice states that he has never found any trace of the young of any freshwater fish among their food, and an examination of the stomach contents of large numbers of these birds from all parts of Scotland fully confirms his statement.

Very briefly let us summarise the food items of the common tern so far as our investigations go from specimens obtained on the East and West Coasts of Scotland, and practically during each month of the year. The total bulk of food consumed by this bird per year is entirely of an animal nature, and 65 per cent. of this consists of fish of various kinds; crustacea and marine worms are present to the extent of 18.5 per cent., molluscs 12 per cent., and miscellaneous animal matter 4.5 per cent.

Of the fish content 35 per cent. consists of sand eels, 6 per cent. of whiting, 6.5 per cent. of herring, 5.5 per cent. of haddock, 4 per cent. of lumpfish, 2 per cent. each of gobies, gurnard and gunnel, and 2 per cent. unidentified. In none of the terns that I have examined have I ever found any remains of freshwater fishes, and I have never met with flies and their larvae.

For the Sandwich tern the figures are very similar, excepting that there are more whiting and 2 per cent. of young cod.

The sea is as full of fish as ever. As Professor Huxley remarked in 1883, our fisheries are inexhaustible, "the multitude," he states, "is so inconceivably great that the number we catch is relatively insignificant . . . the destruction effected by the fisherman cannot sensibly increase the death-rate . . . nothing we do seriously affects the number of the fish." Professor W. A. Herdman states: "The total produce of our sea-fisheries has more than doubled in the last quarter of a century, and the average of the last few years before the War amounted to over a million tons." Finally, Professor McIntosh has assured us that "the day will soon come, if it has not already done so, when such crude notions as to the impoverishment of the sea-fisheries will utterly lapse."

Bearing in mind these views and taking into consideration the actual species of fish upon which the terns feed, some of which are not used by man as food, it seems inconceivable that any committee could write the words quoted above from their Report, and the conclusion is forced upon one that they have pronounced a verdict not in accordance with the facts.

In my opinion the terns are deserving of the strictest protection, both the birds and their eggs, and it is to be hoped that this ill-timed Report of the above-mentioned Committee will incite all lovers of birds to exert themselves to see that there is no relaxation of the present Orders and Regulations affecting them.

WALTER E. COLLIER.

MIGRATORY MOVEMENTS OF WHALES.

Early in May the vanguard of the various species of whales which frequent British waters makes its appearance about eighty miles to the south-west of the Buncaveader whaling station in the Hebridean island of Harris. These whales increase in numbers and approach the coast of the Hebrides to within thirty or forty miles, going north. They consist mainly of blue whales and common rorquals with a few humpbacked whales and Rudolph's rorqual, and an occasional school of sperm whales. From this point the blue whales go directly north towards the Farø Islands and then on to Iceland, passing the Shetlands at some considerable distance. The body of

humpbacks, common rorquals, together with, in some seasons, a considerable number of Rudolph's rorquals, and a few lesser rorquals, take a more north-east course, and in June and July, when they pass through the hosts of their main food supply, the krill, off Roman's Voe in Shetland, swim very slowly, hardly covering more than a hundred miles of sea between the months of June and September. In September the majority of these whales disappear, most of them taking a south-west course to their winter quarters, although there is little doubt but that a fair number winter in the North Sea and off our north-west coast. During the spring migration the whales travel very slowly, but in the autumn they travel very quickly, as if making for some far distant sea.

FLOCKING OF ADULT GOLDENEYE DRAKES IN SPRING.

The adult goldeneye drake is usually seen singly in this country, in winter, or in company with two ducks, or very probably an adult duck and an immature drake. In Orkney I have several times seen small mixed packs of from ten to twenty, on the larger lochs, during the month of February, or I should say apparently mixed packs, for all the supposed females shut out of such packs have proved on handling to be immature males. One year, early in March, I beheld a sight which I venture to think is unique, when I put up at the top end of one of the arms of a large loch, a pack of over a couple of hundred goldeneye, every bird of which was a fully adult drake. They were naturally extremely wild, and presented a magnificent sight as they wheeled and came down wind like feathered bullets. Immature males are very often confused with adult females, although the former are larger and the beak is longer and thicker; moreover, that of the female is crossed by an orange band, which is absent in the young male. This orange band shows up well in life, but very soon fades after death, and in museum specimens has vanished altogether.

H. W. ROBINSON.

SOME RARE SOMALI MAMMALS.

The total rout and destruction of the Mullah's followers has recently opened up a large tract of country in the "Horn of Africa," which, from the point of view of the field naturalist, has been little worked and is almost entirely unknown. Our scanty knowledge of the animal life of this vast region, which for so many years has been the preserve of the Dervishes, had only been supplemented from time to time by a handful of sportsmen and keen observers who have been attached to the native forces operating there.

It is doubtful whether a single specimen of the rare local race of the black rhinoceros now exists in the Nopal Valley. Before the rise of Mahomed Abdullah, that is to say, before the free importation of arms into the interior, the rhinoceros was fairly common in the neighbourhood of the Bur Dab Range and south of it. Even as late as 1914 I saw the spoor near Eli Dab and Wadamogo. A few years previously I was fortunate in obtaining the skull of what must be one of the last of the race. This specimen is now in the Natural History Museum at South Kensington. A few may, however, still exist further west in the Ogaden country.

Another species whose habitat has been opened up by the dispersing of the Dervishes is the Dibsatag, or Clarke's gazelle. This quaint antelope, specimens of which are seldom seen in collections and which in its habits closely resembles the Gazelle, or Waller's gazelle, appears to inhabit quite a restricted area. On the few occasions that I have hunted it I have invariably found it browsing on certain stunted bellium-producing trees which only appear to be found growing in the red earth country to the south and west of the Bur Dab Range.

South of Bohotleh, in the Italian sphere of influence, is found not only the rarest of the dik-diks, but to my mind the most beautiful, namely, Madoqua Piacentini. Specimens of this dik-dik are probably only to be found in the collection in the Natural History Museum at South Kensington. It was only a few years ago discovered and named by me in honor of Mr. Piacentini, the Italian Consul General in Aden, through whose kindness and courtesy I was enabled to send collectors to Obbia and the hinterland. It is strange that specimens of this beautiful little creature, which must have been frequently shot by officers during the first expeditions against the Mullahs, should never have been sent home to this country.

Among carnivores there is a very rare type of desert leopard found in this region, which was given specific rank by Mr. Oldfield Thomas and named *Felis pardus nanopardus* on a single specimen obtained by Major Dunn, R.A.M.C., during one of the first expeditions against the Mullahs. Two specimens, both of which were lost in transit and failed to reach this country, had been previously obtained by Captain John Stewart, who was killed by the Dervishes. The only other specimen of this pigmy leopard known to exist was obtained by one of my collectors and presented by me to the British Museum of Natural History.

R. E. D. R.