

The Fauna Preservation Society

AUGUST, 1956

EDITORIAL NOTES

Great Britain.—The Nature Conservancy have declared two new nature reserves and an addition to a previous one :—

Fyfield Down, Wiltshire, 610 acres, is one of the finest remaining tracts of unreclaimed high chalk downland in England and is probably the richest in sarsen stones, locally known as Grey Wethers, from their resemblance when seen in the distance to a flock of sheep. Geologists consider that the great 20 foot sarsen stones, weighing from 60 to 70 tons, in the circle at Avebury, were brought there from Fyfield Down nearly 4,000 years ago to form the oldest important such structure in Britain and one unique in Europe.

The sarsens are large blocks of sandstone apparently derived from a bed of sand which covered the site in Eocene times. Their distribution is apparently natural, none having been erected as standing stones. They produce an effect of great botanical interest being accompanied by pockets of acid soils, on which grow acid-loving plants such as Sheep's Sorrel. This is in contrast to the ordinary lime-loving plants of downland. Meadow saxifrage is abundant in the reserve. The vegetation indicates an exceptionally high humidity, and bluebells grow in the open. A varied moss flora grows on the stones.

More than 60 breeding species of birds have recently been listed at Fyfield Down, including the wheatear, grasshopper warbler and six species of tits. The hen harrier, buzzard, peregrine, quail, hoopoe, short-eared and long-eared owls have also been observed.

Being close to Avebury, Fyfield Down is within one of the principal areas inhabited by prehistoric man and the celtic field system is one of the largest in England. There is a tumulus to the south of the fields and two others along the western boundary formed by the Ridge Way, which at this point crosses another ancient track known as the Herepath. There are also remains of an ancient village along the 700 foot contour, the highest point on the reserve being about 830 feet.

Yarner Wood, Devon, was declared a nature reserve in 1952. A part of the wood was burnt by incendiary bombs during the "Baedeker" raid on Exeter in 1942. In this section the fire killed about two-thirds of the standing trees and left others badly damaged. This was followed by a dense growth of heather, bilberry and bracken which added to the difficulty of making a detailed survey of the woodland and its fauna and flora in order to prepare a management plan. A plan was, however, completed and adopted early in 1955, part of the wood being set aside for scientific investigations into different methods of regenerating woodland; encouraging colonization by insectivorous birds; and population studies of small mammals by Exeter University.

In order to protect and diversify the reserve, an additional 28 acres adjoining the reserve have now been bought by the Conservancy. Included in this addition are an interesting small alder wood and bog containing plants such as the royal fern.

Inquiries about visits to these two reserves should be made to the Regional Officer for the South, The Nature Conservancy, Furzebrook Research Station, Wareham, Dorset.

Westleton Heath, in Suffolk, straddles the road between Westleton and Dunwich. Part of this heath is already included in the Minsmere nature reserve managed by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, the Conservancy's acquisition of 117 acres on the eastern side safeguards the remainder of the heath up to the boundary of the Forestry Commission's Dunwich Forest, which lies between it and the sea.

The heath is well-known for its birds, including the stonechat, woodlark, red-backed shrike, stone-curlew, lesser redpoll and nightjar. It also has great importance as one of the few good surviving examples of the characteristic and formerly extensive East Suffolk heathlands, most of which have recently been reclaimed for agriculture or afforestation, or have been absorbed by the needs of defence.

The dry, sandy and shingly soil is of low fertility and is underlaid by the Westleton Beds, sands and gravel of mid-Glacial (Pleistocene age) laid down under marine conditions. It is clothed largely in heather and is crossed or bounded by roads and footpaths to which the public are asked to keep in order to reduce the fire risk and to avoid disturbing the wild life.

Inquiries and applications for permits should be addressed to the Regional Officer for East Anglia, The Nature Conservancy, 6 Upper King Street, Norwich, Norfolk.

Minsmere Nature Reserve, Suffolk.—During May a heath fire started accidentally by two boys on Dunwich common, swept

over 150 acres of Minsmere sanctuary, including the north marsh and part of the woodland. First reports led one to fear that irretrievable damage had been done, but in fact the main marsh, breeding place of marsh harrier and bearded tit, was saved, the stone curlew area unaffected and the main woodland not very seriously damaged.

Only the unremitting toil of an army of fire fighters and especially the splendid work of Mr. Richard Wolfendale, warden for the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, prevented a catastrophe.

Western Australia.—The Bulletin for Honorary Wardens brings us news of new fauna sanctuaries—Lake Mears, in the Quairading–Brookton District, and three freshwater lakes north of Yealering in the Corrigin district.

Replying to criticism of the 400,000 acre flora and fauna reserve at the Murchison River, Mr. Kelly, the Minister for Fisheries, gave cogent reasons for the establishment of this reserve. In a speech full of sound conservation, he pointed out that fair sized reserves were necessary to act as control areas for scientific investigation, so that plant climaxes, normal successions, primitive soil structures and soil fauna might be studied. Exotic flora soon invaded small, narrow areas. Bad land use in the past had brought about many failures in agriculture.

Mr. Kelly referred also to another purpose of reserves—the preservation of fauna in its own right. Reserves must be established before the land had been assigned to agriculture or industry and before natural habitats had been irreparably altered. Good land must be included. To reserve only poor land would defeat the purpose of the reserve.

Victoria.—On the 28th March, *The Times* published an article which described “potting” at kangaroos with a shot-gun and, writing of Mildura, Victoria, stated that shooting kangaroos by car was a universal pastime in those parts.

We consulted the Wild Life Preservation Society of Australia on this matter and, through them, received the following information :

From Mr. A. Dunbabin Butcher, Director of Game and Fisheries, Victoria :

“The destruction of kangaroos in this state is illegal except under permit.

We have a very active officer at Mildura and I think it is unlikely that any incident, such as the one described, would occur in his territory without his becoming aware of it and informing my office.”

From the Inspector of Fisheries and Game at Mildura, Mr. W. G. Kelly (mentioned above) :

“I police this area very strongly and if shooters are detected, guns are confiscated and persons are brought to court.

The season (Kangaroo) is closed in Victoria for the whole of the year. Kangaroo shooting is permitted by permit for graziers where damage is being done to properties at any time or where they become a nuisance.”

Protection of the Flamingo.—We are pleased to hear from Mr. Arthur Vernay of the continued successful work of the Society for the Protection of the Flamingo in the Bahamas. In 1954 floods caused great damage to the nesting birds but, by the end of the 1955 season, owing to better weather and the unceasing work of the Society's wardens, it was estimated that the flamingo population at Inagua stood at 15,000 birds. The importance of the Inagua colony can be judged by what has been happening to the flamingo elsewhere. In America these birds now nest regularly in only four widely separated localities besides Inagua : In Yucatan, on Bonaire Island in the southern Caribbean, on La Orchila off Venezuela and at Abaco. In 1955 there were heavy losses in the hitherto promising colonies at Yucatan and Bonaire. Both tragedies were occasioned by visiting photographers, who bribed inexperienced wardens in the one instance and eluded the government police in the other. Although the Bonaire birds were kept from their nests for only 45 minutes this was sufficient to cause them to desert. At La Orchila, the small colony has now attracted the interest and special protection of the President of Venezuela, who has a villa on the same island.

Turning to the flamingo colony in the Carmargue, we are pleased to hear from Mr. John Hillaby, who has recently visited the area, that contrary to other reports, the flamingo colony has not suffered complete disaster from the frosts of last February. Although possibly between 2,000 and 3,000 flamingos perished, many of them immature birds, the breeding stock has been maintained.