

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

O W E M

The Editor welcomes letters from readers for these columns but they should be brief. Photographs, to accompany letters, are invited which illustrate points of interest, or deal with curiosities of nature and of matters concerned with the countryside.

FOOD OR FUEL?

SIR,—In your issue of July 12th you gave prominence to the great damage done to food production by digging up farmland for opencast coal at Wentworth Woodhouse in South Yorkshire.

Six weeks later Mr. Tom Williams, the Minister of Agriculture, summoned farmers from all over the country to tell them that, as a result of the economic crisis, food production must be vastly increased: that the level of production must be 50 per cent. higher than in the pre-war years; that we must produce £100 million worth more food in this country.

Two days after Mr. Williams had spoken, the Ministry of Fuel announced that it had decided to seize 251 more acres on the Wentworth Estate.

Over two-thirds of the area now to be taken out of food production is good farmland (the rest is growing timber of which, as with food, we are also short). One farmer who obtained 32 cwt. to the acre from his land—the average for the country is 18.6 cwt.—will have his farm reduced to half its pre-war size; another, who has already been moved by opencast coal working, will have to reduce his milk producing herd.

Could anything be more fantastic and, in the present circumstances, more tragic than the spectacle of one Cabinet Minister engaged in cancelling out the efforts of another?

LESLIE SHERIDAN
(Lt.-Col.)

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BLACK RHINO AND WHITE

SIR,—I have read in your issue of June 14th, Mr. Boje Benzon's interesting account of the Danish expedition's adventures with black and white rhino last March in the Bahr-el-Ghazal.

There is only one inaccuracy in the account. The particular specimen of black rhino shot cannot be definitely identified as the one which chased me several years ago, nor had it killed eleven Dinkas. These Dinkas were reported killed by the score or so of rhino living in this area, 150 miles west of the Nile at latitude 9, during a period of years.

The distribution of the black rhino is interesting. It was previously known that (in the Sudan) the black is found on the east bank and the white on the west. This pocket of assumedly white rhino, living west of the Nile, seemed to be changing their racial habits by becoming pugnacious and by taking to a forest life and diet. Nobody suspected their identity and when I was confronted at close quarters, I was much too busy playing the Toreador to look for the square or pointed lip.

The Danish expedition has proved that the rhino living in this constricted area, fifteen miles by ten perhaps, are black, the first black rhino known to exist west of the Nile, where all rhino were assumed to be white. Now a few rhino are scattered about the scarcely inhabited tributaries of the Bahr-el-Ghazal and into French territory beyond the Congo divide. From inquiries in the last few months about their habits,

I strongly suspect that these will all prove to be of the black kind, the white sticking to the flat savannah country closer to the White Nile. The westward range of the black may therefore be much greater than had been suspected. This, however, is a question of fact on which I hope to get direct evidence before long.

RICHARD OWEN
Wau, Anglo-Egyptian Sudan.

SIR,—With reference to the letter from the Game Warden of the Sudan in your issue of August 16th, perhaps it may be of interest to him to know that in 1913 there used to be a lot of white rhinoceros in the countries of chiefs Maringinda and Mbiti, in what was then known as Temburu district of the Bahr-el-Ghazal. Two years later the natives of Rumbeek district told me that black rhino were common there, but that the white were unknown. The two districts were contiguous.

The Game Warden is wrong about only one skin of the forest situtunga having been obtained. I sent five or six to the British Museum, as far as I can recollect, with a head or two. I also sent a head to the game warden's office in Khartoum, and another to the governor's office in Wau.

The natives of the Sudan-Congo border probably kill more of this antelope (first reported by me in *The Field*) than of the bongo (also first reported in *The Field* about 1912). But the killing of bongo having been forbidden somewhere about 1930 or '32, they refused to disclose possession of any more skins or heads of situtunga, fearing that they might get into trouble over them, as over the bongo.

Anyone searching for either of the above species might easily see yellow-backed dinka; and also the four-tusked elephants about which the Editor of *The Field* was rather sceptical when I reported their existence originally, some 30 years ago.

P. M. LARKEN
2, Raynham Villas, Stoke, Plymouth.

ENERGETIC GUNDOG

SIR,—The enclosed picture, which you may care to reproduce as being of interest to dog lovers and shooting men, well depicts the energy and enthusiasm which this particular dog displays when working. Such keenness in the field is worthy of special merit, and I doubt if there are many gundogs who would essay such a leap in the performance of their duty!

L. R. P.
London, W.

OSPREY IN DEVON

SIR,—On the 13th August, at 2.30 p.m., I was on the highest part of the railway embankment within about ¼ mile N. of Woodbury Road Station searching through glasses amongst a lot of waders for an albino ringed plover which I had seen the previous day, when, for no apparent reason, they all rose and flew away. On putting down my glasses I saw what I took to be a buzzard flying over the estuary. I was above the bird and noted that with the exception of the black primaries, the back, tail and wings were dark brown. I watched it as it flew over the water in different directions until it came to rest on the top of a "guide post" in the estuary at the

edge of the Clyst Gully, about ¼ a mile in a S.W. direction from where I was sitting. I managed to get a bit nearer, but not in a position to see any colouring before it flew off; but before doing so I noted a suspicion of a crest. I watched it for 15–20 minutes, during which time it quivered the estuary, with almost continued lazy flapping of wings and an occasional swoop towards the water, on nearing which it lowered its legs to full length, and on six occasions struck the water. On the sixth occasion it was lost in the spray for a second or two and emerged with something shining in its claws, a fish presumably, of fair size.

I have never before seen this bird to be only assume this bird to have been one.

S. C. ATLEE HUNT
Member of Devon Bird Watching and Preservation Society.
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OUR BIGGEST GROUSE

SIR,—The capercaillie is our biggest bird of the grouse family. Two cock birds, after a Ross-shire shoot, weighed over 12lb each. The capercaillie has a curious history in Britain. It formerly existed in England and Ireland, but died out in those countries at unknown dates. The last indigenous capercaillie of Scotland is supposed to have died out about 1770.

Attempts to restock Scotland with capercaillie made prior to 1837 failed, but in that year 29 of the birds sent from Sweden to the Marquess of Bredalbane, Throve for many years, and finally "restocked" the major part of Scotland with this noble tree-haunting grouse.

The new breed of capercaillie transported themselves from Perthshire in all directions, but at Inveraray, and in Arran, the birds never thrived well, and died out; in the case



OVER THE TOP

(See letter "Energetic Gundog")

GREY SQUIRREL AND RAT

SIR,—While my brother was sitting indoors, he saw what he first thought were two grey squirrels scampering about on the lawn. However, when he returned with a gun, one squirrel had disappeared and he saw the other running into the shrubbery. After an ineffectual search for the latter, he returned to the spot where the squirrels were first seen and found a full grown dead rat, which was quite warm. This seems ample evidence that the notorious reputation of the grey squirrel is somewhat redeemed if it can, and does, kill the rat, which is generally assumed to be the greatest pest of our countryside.

MICHAEL LITTON
Woolmer Lodge, Liphook, Hants.

BUCKLER'S HARD

SIR,—I am sending you what I consider to be a very attractive view of Buckler's Hard, the small Hampshire village from which, in olden days, so many famous ships were launched. Modern cars now park on the ancient slipway from which the "Wooden Walls" that helped to win Trafalgar were launched into the Beaulieu River. Such famous ships as *Agamemnon*, *Swiftsure* and *Euryalus* were launched from here.

R.N.V.R.
Hampshire.

WHERE THE "WOODEN WALLS" WERE LAUNCHED

(See letter "Buckler's Hard")

of the Inveraray colony round about 1842. The last bird of the Arran colony was reported as being shot there a few years ago.

It was assumed by old writers that the dying out of capercaillie (and, incidentally, of blackgame) in England and Ireland was a result of the disappearance of the old forests, and perhaps of over-shooting. Capercaillie are grouse however, and like blackgame and ptarmigan suffer from the same diseases as the red grouse. The birds died numerously from disease a few years ago, and many were picked up dead under the pines round about 1939, and again in 1944.

Capercaillie and blackgame forwarded for laboratory investigation from 1943 onward were found to harbour the germs of coccidiosis in greater or lesser number. Coccidiosis is extremely fatal to chicks and poult, and, where game or other birds fall to rear young, its presence may be inferred.

The imported breed of capercaillie is at a new low level of population at the present time, and there is something more than deforestation (or shooting) wanted to account for the new low levels of capercaillie, blackgame and red grouse populations at the present time.

A present day examination of existing capercaillie stock, on a much larger scale than that carried out of late years by me, would go some way towards proving that woodland grouse suffer from coccidiosis just as red grouse do.

DUGALD MACINTYRE
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