

BIRD SANCTUARIES AND THEIR EFFECT ON AGRICULTURE

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(*Note.*—At the meeting of the Central Board of Agriculture held on November 16, 1939, a resolution was moved that Bird Sanctuaries which have been proclaimed in agricultural areas should be abolished as they breed birds which cause damage to paddy. Mr. W. W. A. Phillips, who is an authority on the subject, was present and spoke at the meeting. It is felt that his remarks are of general interest to agriculturists in Ceylon and they are therefore reproduced below.—*Editor T. A.*)

I am informed, on good authority, that the resolution that you have just heard proposed had its origin, not in the complaints of the paddy-cultivators but in the murmurings of certain so-called sportsmen who were very disgruntled when they found that they were no longer allowed to shoot in season and out of season, in certain of the areas that have now been proclaimed Sanctuaries. These gentlemen, I am given to understand, fostered for their own ends an agitation amongst the ignorant cultivators, the outcome of which is the present resolution. Certainly, I have never heard a word of complaint from anyone, against the Sanctuaries in the North-Central and Northern Provinces, although the Sanctuaries in these provinces are numerous and situated close to highly-cultivated areas.

The Sanctuaries which it is now proposed to abolish were instituted for one purpose and one purpose only—namely, to protect the breeding haunts of the birds that are so beneficial to agriculture, and in this way, to encourage the natural control of the enemies of our paddy crops.

One hears quite a lot, in these days, about the scientific control of various insect pests, by means of parasites that feed upon the said pests, their larvae or their eggs. We have heard recently of the success that has attended the efforts of the T.R.I. to control Tea Tortrix by the breeding and liberating of an insect parasite and also of the control of the coconut caterpillar in a similar manner, but how often do we hear, in this country, any mention of the control of locusts, grasshoppers and other injurious insect pests of paddy by the most beneficial bird, the Egret? In other countries, the beneficial activities of Egrets, Storks and like birds are fully recognized. In one country,

where I underwent an enforced residence for some years, it was a major offence to kill a Stork or to interfere, in any way, with the nesting of the Rose-coloured Starling, another very beneficial bird at certain seasons of year. Yet, in this country, Egrets, Storks and other beneficial species were, until recently, shot down with impunity and in many areas they are still shot and their young are ruthlessly slaughtered just before they are able to fly.

In order to give these birds a little of the protection that they so richly deserve and afford them the opportunity to breed undisturbed, the Bird Sanctuaries that it is now suggested should be abolished, were proclaimed. These Sanctuaries have already proved beneficial and, given the chance, they will, in a few more years, do a very great deal more good.

It is not suggested that our Sanctuaries do not, on occasions, harbour Teal and Blue Coot—the only two species of larger birds that do some damage to paddy cultivation. At sowing times, Whistling Teal undoubtedly may do damage to paddy—but the remedy is provided for in the regulations governing the Sanctuaries—for anyone may shoot Teal or any other bird, animal or reptile, in defence of himself or his property at any time. Teal or Blue Coot, invading paddy-fields, may therefore be shot when they are causing damage.

I have been at pains to try and discover whether Whistling Teal breed in any numbers in any of our Bird Sanctuaries but, as far as I have been able to ascertain, only a few pairs do so breed. The vast majority nest in some of the smaller, isolated tanks in the more northerly districts and in India and migrate southwards at certain seasons of the year. At Wirawila, I have it on the authority of the late Mr. Chas. Northway, who had a house on the shores of that Sanctuary-Tank, that a few, if any, Teal regularly nest there. On the other hand, large numbers of Egrets, of various species, certainly do breed there as I have seen their nests with my own eyes.

Even though we may admit that certain species, harmful to paddy-cultivation, do make use of the Sanctuaries, *on balance*, the good that is done by the beneficial species far outweighs any harm that may be done by the harmful species. It would, therefore, be a most foolish, not to say wanton and unscientific, act to sacrifice the beneficial species for the acts of the harmful species. While other countries are recognizing, more and more, the need for more Sanctuaries and the further encouragement of beneficial birds, it would be an extraordinary act for this Board to pass a resolution having as its object the abolition of the very Sanctuaries that are now beginning to be of so much benefit to the agriculturists of the Island.