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COUNTRY LIFE

More Weights of Birds

On this page, a year ago, I made a short list of the weights of some common birds taken almost at random from the pages of that Victorian bird-lover, the Rev. F. O. Morris. Apparently a great many people had, like myself, never considered the question of the weights of birds, and the list astonished. Many correspondents apparently could forget the fact that a tit's weight was reckoned in drachms and that a heron, with a wing-span in the full grown bird of five feet, weighed only three pounds. A well-known publisher, spending his holiday in the Scilly Islands, wrote asking for the weights of various sea-birds. I give a list of these in the next paragraph. Meanwhile it may interest him and others to have more proof of the extreme fragility of small birds. A yellow-hammer weighs seven drachms; a grey wagtail five drachms. A swift, rather surprisingly, weighs nearly an ounce. A cuckoo, not surprising to anyone who has seen a young cuckoo being fed, goes slightly over a quarter of a pound. A peewit weighs half a pound, a tree pipit nearly six drachms, a greenfinch eight drachms, a corn-bunting nearly two ounces. A tree creeper has the record, I think, with a weight of two drachms. In all cases the weight is that of the male bird.

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Sea Birds

The difference between these tiny weights and those of sea birds is naturally considerable. In fact there is no purely land bird, in England, which can approach the weight of the cormorant, which weighs seven or eight pounds. But the weights among sea-birds generally are still surprising. You would expect a common gull, with a wing-span of three feet, to weigh a little more than sixteen ounces, and a kittiwake, with an even larger wing-span, to exceed fourteen. A herring-gull has a wing-span of almost four and a half feet, but weighs less than two pounds. A common tern weighs only four ounces, a manx shearwater seventeen. By contrast, a red-throated diver, having a wing-span roughly that of the common gull, weighs three times as much. A guillemot goes roughly a pound and a half, an oyster-catcher just over a pound, but a turnstone only four ounces. It is interesting to note that, according to Morris, the swan puts these and all other English birds into the shade completely. He gives the weight of the male as thirty pounds. But other observers disagree with this. They declare the swan to be an astonishingly light bird, that can be tucked under the arm, if the wings are tightly held, as easily as a cockerel.

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Village Government

Mr. J. W. Robertson Scott has recently been attacking, in his own particularly restrained and common-sense fashion, that type of country-lover who, migrating to the country, never lifts a finger to take part in its government. Village people are notoriously indifferent to the way their parishes are governed and the point of his remark is that every country-loving outsider should make it his duty to get himself elected to one or other of his local councils. I am completely with him. Like him I believe that the beauty of the English countryside rests just as much on the efficiency of its cottage sanitation as it does on the ability of its people to grow roses round the door. A short period of service on so dull-sounding an affair as a Rating Committee can be a revelation. I have never been deluded by the picturesque in cottage architecture, but a recent quinquiennial valuation let some ugly cats out of what I had always considered a fairly picturesque bag. The gross rateable value of about a score of cottages under consideration was, it turned out, under ten pounds. Six of these cottages had only one door; half of them had doors so small that a man of five-feet-six would, on entering, be likely to knock his head off; in none of them could the sanitation be described as anything but archaic; in two of them the inside walls were still of cow-dung plaster, white-washed; and in about half the cases the rent was more than ten shillings. I have no excess of love for council houses, but the size of the response to the announcement that we were about to erect a group of four did not stagger me.

Village Allotments

That ponderous but well-intentioned vehicle, The Town and Country Planning Act, seems now to have got well into a second gear. When it hopes to be running smoothly in top I doubt if even its sponsors would care to say. Some of its provisions have astonished countrymen. In addition to making provision for both public and private open spaces in the country, an excellent thing, it seeks to increase the space for village allotments. What bureaucrat conceived this scheme I do not know, but it would have interested him to see, at a recent Rural Council meeting specially called to deal with it, almost every one of twenty members getting up to say that three-quarters of the allotments in his village were already derelict. In not a single case was there a shortage of allotments; in every case the desire for allotments was dying or dead. In some cases as much as five acres were derelict; in my own village there are allotments that have not been worked for the better part of ten years and will not be worked, apparently, for another ten. Yet, according to the Act, more allotment land must be reserved by parish councils and, if necessary, purchased by them. Since land is literally not wanted and since a penny rate, in many villages, produces under ten pounds, what the average parish councillor thinks of the ministerial workings is, not for the first time, unprintable here.

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A Scarcity of Rabbits

The succession of recent mild winters produced a plague of rabbits. Now countrymen are reporting a shortage. During last autumn rabbits were plentiful and, in that charming spell of late October summer, could be seen sitting in scores among the long white grasses in the afternoon sun. Rabbit sellers called at the door and a good rabbit—a dish rated far higher by the French than ourselves—Australians have been heard to declare they would rather eat rats—could be had for sixpence. After the bitter weather of November and December the rabbit sellers gave up calling and in the shops the price of a rabbit rose to eighteenpence. Small farmers, in my own village, have now almost given up ferretting, and in the surrounding fields I have not seen a rabbit for two months. Gamekeepers and shepherds confirm this. From the sale of rabbits many gamekeepers are accustomed to get the price of the winter's pheasant food. This year they will not make it, one tells me, by half. A shepherd tells me that almost the only rabbits he sees in a daily round of some miles are dead ones, and says that there are two causes for it: the milder winters—"and blowed if a rabbit don't eat tough in mild weather somehow"—and the increasing prevalence of liver disease.

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Woods Transformed

Woodland fires have long been known to produce astonishing transformations in flower-life; desolation has frequently produced fox-glove and willow-herb as thick as corn where previously fox-glove and willow-herb were hardly known. The thinning out of woods produces something of the same effect and in many thinned-out woods, where previously primrose and bluebell alone grew on a large scale, there has been a lightning increase in the spread of pink campion. Slightly taller than the bluebell and flowering at the same time, its petticoat pinkness against the pink-touched blue of the bluebells produces a colour combination that no gardener would attempt but which is at once arresting and right. In another wood, once all larch, with that peculiarly sunless aridity of larch-woods that have gone beyond their prime, I saw a transformation still more remarkable. Cleared of larches, the ground sprang to life. It not only became covered with flowers, from the earliest pools of white violets to the late tangle of teazle and willow-herb that was as tall as a man, but intermediately it gave another surprise. In July it produced, over an area of five or six acres, more wild strawberries than I had ever hoped to see in one place. As large as raspberries, they covered almost every inch of what had once been barren ground. They had the mouth-watering tart lusciousness of those *fraises des bois* which visitors to France complain they never get at home.

H. E. BATES.

[*Sir William Beach Thomas, who is travelling abroad for a few weeks, will resume charge of this page on April 8th.*]

COUNTRY LIFE

Live Quail

The readers of *The Spectator* have a feather in their caps. On this page, about a year ago, I made an appeal for support for the International Committee of Bird Preservation, a society existing for the protection of birds in general and "in order to preserve many birds from a condition bordering either on extinction or a critical diminution in numbers," and in these matters "to insist on as great a degree of international reciprocity in legislation as possible." Among its particular activities I mentioned its efforts to secure protection for the quail, a bird caught in hundreds of thousands in Egypt and exported alive during the breeding season to various European countries, notably Italy and England. In Egypt, during this period of spring migration, when quail are physiologically ready to breed and are already mated, something like 350,000 birds were in recent years annually trapped and exported alive. This spring migration occurs from February to the end of May. In autumn there is a return migration, lasting from the middle of August to the middle of October and reaching its height in September. Tired out from their long passage across the Mediterranean, the quail again run into the nets set to trap them and the number of birds killed is again something like 350,000. The quail is thus desperately reduced in numbers twice a year and on three separate migration routes: the Nile Valley routes supplying Eastern Europe, the Tunisian-Italian route supplying Central Europe, and on the Moroccan-Algerian-Spanish route, supplying Western Europe and England. A continuation of this slaughter could only mean the end of the quail.

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The Quail Protection Act

But now, happily, all this, as far as England is concerned, has been stopped. And the readers of *The Spectator* have, in a sense, stopped it. At least they have materially helped to stop it. On December 22nd of last year the Quail Protection Act, 1937, received the Royal Assent after one of the quickest passages ever given to a Bird Bill. The Act prohibits the importation into the United Kingdom of any live quail between February 14th and July 1st. And the Secretary of the British Section of the International Committee now writes to me: "Your note in *The Spectator* last spring brought in many new supporters, and we could not have achieved what we have done and have in view to do without their financial support." This is the feather in the caps of the readers of *The Spectator*. As it was estimated that in 1934 no fewer than 750,000 quail were caught and exported alive during the migratory seasons, the feather is a considerable one. The Act, which follows the action of the Egyptian Government in prohibiting the export of quail during the same period, is designed also to give the lead to the whole of Europe. This is important, for there are still countries, such as Greece and Turkey, which by taking advantage of Egypt's self-sacrificial action could build up a large export trade in quail and thus continue to menace its existence.

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The Society's Aims

Membership of an International Society is almost the only means by which a private person can help in the protection of birds which, like the quail, are menaced by ruthless commercial exploitation, and the aims of the International Committee for Bird Preservation ought to interest all those who love birds. It seeks not only to protect birds like quail and duck (also menaced all over Northern Europe) but to improve the conditions under which live birds are transported by sea and also to prevent the pollution of the high seas by waste oil. It has interest in native birds, is working a scheme by which duck are ringed on a scale large enough to make it possible to trace their lines of migration, and carries on a large general campaign of propaganda. Its offices are c/o Zoological Society, Regent's Park, N.W. 1. Patrons are invited at a subscription of three guineas, associates at half a guinea, a year.

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The Planting of Conifers

Those who have so energetically opposed the planting of conifers in Lakeland and in other districts already rich in natural beauty may like to hear of one district, at least, where the large-scale planting of larch has done something to cover up the desolation of a countryside that, even in its pristine stage, never crept into the guide books. The rich iron ore deposits of the Welland and Nene valleys, in Northamptonshire, are now being worked at increasing pressure. The immediate result of the Welland scheme has been to slap down on a piece of the greenest landscape in England a new town, almost completely Scottish, of 10,000 people. The results of the Nene schemes have accumulated far more slowly. Earth deposits, unlevelled, have gradually piled up into a hideous system of clay-coloured alps that stand out raw and dead from a country that has never been rich in trees. These alps are now being planted with conifers. If they survive the effect will be rather like the planting down, on a small scale, of a section of the Black Forest. The word black may be more appropriate than it seems. This valley is reported, and has been reported for fifty years, to be rich in coal.

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The Morning Chorus

How early in the year does the morning chorus of bird-song begin? The magnificent tuning up of the bird orchestra, so exhilarating in full spring, seems to have nothing to do with January; yet on the morning of January 12th, on a day when the maximum temperature along the English south coast and even in Scotland was higher than that of Rome, it was already splendid. It had all the characteristics of the full spring chorus: concentration, so that all the birds seemed to be sitting on the roof of the house, excitement, pure joy, and was performed in pitch darkness. Later in the morning it lost its concentration, spreading out in normal fashion, but was still astonishingly rich for the time of the year. That evening the thrushes prolonged it beyond twilight. Two days later a gale reputedly of 100 m.p.h. silenced everything except the thrushes, which sang brilliantly against it in the falling darkness. A day later the wind lessened and changed, veering north, and at seven in the morning the bird chorus was again enchanting.

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Two Robins

Almost every day, during the autumn, it was a common thing to hear the scream of rabbit pursued by stoat. One morning there was a new voice of distress. It became a double voice. I looked up to see two robins indulging in what seemed to be an extra vigorous display of mating affection at the wrong time of the year. They appeared suddenly to be yanked across the garden as though tied to the same invisible piece of string. They were yanked back. They tore up into a tree, chattering madly, and down again; disappeared into a tangle of a rock rose, beat themselves out again with frenzy, fought like cocks in mid-air, collapsed on the ground together, and were silent. I walked over to investigate. They sprang up like two boxers ashamed of having taken a breather, had a second furious bout in mid-air, disappeared among the michaelmas daisies, scuffled frantically, and were silent again. When I found them they were bloody, glass-eyed and completely knocked out. As I picked up one the other dragged himself off, squeaked a little, walked lame-legged, flopped in complete misery and hid himself away. I held the other in my hand, quietened him. I was surprised to see the red of his breast come off, like rust, on my hands. Suddenly, after deluding me for five minutes into thinking that his neck was broken, he flew off and up into the willow tree. His sparring partner followed. Two minutes later they were singing to each other madly.

* * * *

A Catalogue for Epicures

I have never felt impelled to review a gardening catalogue until confronted with Bunyard's *Vegetables for Epicures*. This twenty-page booklet issued by the famous Maidstone firm is devoted entirely to aristocratic vegetables, and makes the mouth water on every page. Here are some of its high-spots: lima beans, suitable for a warm situation; blue coca beans, ornamental as well as delicious; orache, a blonde venus among spinachs; poke-weed, whose young summer shoots have the flavour of asparagus; scolymus, the golden thistle, cultivated as salsify; skirret, also similar to salsify; and the well-known border plant *Inula Helenium*, whose violet-scented roots are candied and eaten. H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

Yugoslavian Country Life

I have always had a suspicion, quite heretical of course, that the English farmer does not know how well off he is. During February I travelled for a short time in Yugoslavia. Two things struck me forcibly about that interesting country: first, the sub-tropical luxuriance of the coast fringe, where mimosa and narcissus and pale grey-mauve flag-iris were already in bloom, with masses of yellow phlomis and wild stock and almond to come; and second, the black pitilessness of the immediate hinterland, where almost the only signs of vegetation even in the valleys were olives interspersed with stunted junipers and even more stunted oaks growing out of a land that looked as if it had been crushed under a volcanic avalanche. Somewhere between these oaks and rocks and junipers were the fields of the Yugoslavian peasant. Their average area was probably equal to that of the parlour of an English council house. I could see no grass. These fields had been marked out by low walls of stone exactly as a child marks out an area of sand with lines of pebbles. In February there were no crops; but to judge from the markets the chief product was potatoes, which looked very good, some species of sprouting broccoli, which looked less than cattle food, and the donkey. That stringy animal provided, in the form of hams, the only meat I could see. Reputed to be delicious, it looked terrible. It had the sinewy toughness of the peasants themselves, who in turn reflected the inexorable hardness of the land they worked. And it struck me that it might be a good thing for English agriculture if every English farmer could spend one day, preferably in January or July, in those bitter Lilliputian fields.

* * * *

More Afforestation

Following its decision to afforest certain areas in the east and north, both of which have inspired a good deal of public protest, the Forestry Commission now proposes, according to a letter in *The Times* of February 17th, to plant another large belt on the Sussex Downs. This land, lying east of the Cuckmere valley, between the villages of West Dean and Jevington, is reported to be of solid chalk, with only a few inches of soil, and covered only with the incomparable downland grass and large patches of gorse. It is said that trees have never grown there and that they never will, and that afforestation can only produce a jungle of rank and inflammable bramble and grass. I have no doubt the Forestry Commission can produce all sorts of plausible reasons for its action both here and in other areas, but it passes my comprehension why it so often chooses to afforest areas already notable for a special beauty of their own and which are so often reported to be unsuitable for trees. If the Forestry Commission would go to certain rural districts of Midland England, to name only one area, they would find there thousands of acres, now derelict, on some of which, to my knowledge, neither plough nor beast has made a mark for the last ten or fifteen years. These areas, now covered by bramble and haw and twitch and coltsfoot, have never had any special beauty of their own. Moderate afforestation there would be a godsend. It would be a transformation to some of the least exciting, least loved and apparently least respected English countryside.

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Against Afforestation

It is my belief that the various public protests against the afforestation of certain districts is based on something more than love of the area which is to be so changed. To my mind the idea of a forest is becoming more and more foreign to the English nature. The English mind is repelled by any excessive largeness in the scheme of country things; it rejoices in small fields, small streams and above all, I think, in small woodlands. The prospect of an England covered even partially with large areas of pine forests would be intolerable to it. The English revel in a landscape that can change, in ten miles, from downland to valley, pasture to woodland, cornland to park. Any scheme for the afforestation of a great tract of the least loved of English countryside would be opposed, I think, almost as strongly as a scheme for covering it with bungalows. To walk in a plantation of larch is no better than walking in a plantation of scaffold poles. We are rightly jealous of the beauty of bare downs, sparse lakesides, empty stretches of moor. The Forestry Commission is working, in a sense, against the English nature. All the more reason, therefore, why it should not have quite all its own way with English lake and down.

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Tulipa Fosteriana

Among tulip species, which to my mind are the most attractive of wild bulbs, *T. Fosteriana* is magnificent. I would recommend all gardeners to try a few bulbs of this rare, easy and really glorious tulip, the largest of the Turkestan species and only rivalled for size and colour by the similarly exclusive *T. Gregii*. Fully opened flowers of *T. Fosteriana* have been known to measure ten inches across, the flower like some huge scarlet saucer centrally blotched either with black or gold or with these colours combined. *T. Fosteriana*, which flowers in April, has never presented any difficulties of cultivation to me. Planted in ordinary loam on an unsheltered ledge of the rock garden, bulbs flowered the first year, though badly persecuted by mice, and continued to flower a second year, but without increasing. According to the late W. R. Dykes, whose incomplete volume on tulip species is almost as glorious as the tulips themselves, *T. Fosteriana* is very slow to increase. Like many other tulip species, it yields various forms which flower slightly earlier or later than the true type, and has charming leaf variations from glaucous green to bluish grey. Bulbs offered by English firms are, as usual, obviously meant to attract millionaires. The Dutch, somehow, do these things just as well and at a tenth of the price.

* * * *

Gulls and Plovers

When birds and animals are transplanted from natural environment, and so from its natural hardships and natural enemies, to situations where life is easier, we know what to look for. The grey squirrel is our classic example of the persecution that follows; the musk-rat might have been another. But these animals were man-transported. The sea-gull now provides an example of what happens when a bird decides to transport itself. The sight of sea-gulls on the Thames at Westminster and on the flood waters of inland rivers was once a rarity dilligently reported by old writers and the appearance of sea-gulls inland at all was solemnly held to be an omen of bad weather at sea. Now there are possibly more sea-gulls in the parks of London than on the cliffs at Dover, and many on inland plough and piece of ploughed land has its flock throughout the winter, mild or cold, wild or calm. Inland, the sea-gull behaves very like the plover, inhabiting the same kind of land, the flocks of the two birds intermingling. The result, for the plover, is very much as though the sea-gull had been man-transported. Like the red squirrel, it is being hounded down by a creature for whom sheltered ploughed lands are a mere cake-walk. Almost every day it is now possible to hear, about the countryside, the scream of gull-persecuted plovers, and it is a common sight to see gulls, like hawks, singling out a solitary plover and hounding it out of the flock with that greedy rapacity which makes them apparently London's most popular birds.

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Lilium Candidum

Successful cultivation of the Madonna Lily, *L. Candidum*, has consistently eluded me. Imported bulbs, home bulbs, begged bulbs have all shrivelled ingloriously in soil which grows *L. Regale*, *L. Henryi*, *L. Speciosum* and others with considerable success. I have seen the Madonna grow with the lustiness of cattle cabbages in pure clay, in clay seasoned liberally with mortar, under hot south walls, in the middle of gravel paths, and under other conditions not laid down by the text books: but always for other people. Now a correspondent writes urging the use of coal. He advises digging a deep hole, putting in a quantity of small coal, and planting the bulbs at the right depth. Then a dressing of sorbex. I shall certainly try it. The essential for all lilies is good drainage, and it was the late E. G. Wilson who pointed out that, in nature the bulbs of lilies often rested on rock.

H. E. Bates.

COUNTRY LIFE

Ditching and Dyking

The state of English dykes or ditches today is something which would have given Cobbett apoplexy. It is less than a generation since the art of ditching and dyking was one of the most revered articles in the whole agricultural creed. But during seven years in the heart of one of the richest agricultural districts in England I have only once seen a dyke being dug and only twice a ditch being cleaned. The man digging the dyke was oppressed by an excusable pessimism. "They don't care. They ain't got time. They don't bother." Two or three years later the wettest winter recorded in these islands for more than a hundred years devastated scores of acres. During that time I do not recall having seen a ditch running, though I saw many fields waterlogged on the tops of gradients on which many motorists would change gear. To the average English farmer the art of ditching and dyking appears, in fact, to be completely dead. In the matter of public ditches the situation is ironical. If the public ditch in your village gives trouble, you send for the sanitary inspector, who is also an inspector of nuisances. If the ditch receives cesspool effluvient he reminds you that you, the householder, are responsible. But if the ditch takes surface water, as it naturally does, he refers you to the surveyor. You are lucky if the surveyor, in turn, does not remind you that he is concerned only with public and not private overflow. Between the two you preserve the *status quo*, and can record still another example of the fatuity of rural government.

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Hawk and Cuckoo

I have been severely taken to task by purists for calling a kestrel a sparrow-hawk. I am guilty, but unrepentant. I was, unfortunately, brought up to call a kestrel a sparrow-hawk, just as I was taught that hawks and cuckoos were one and the same thing, for the simple reason that you never saw them together and at the same time of the year. Suckled on such country ignorance, I also called a rook a crow. I never spoke of anything but scaring crows, of crow's-nests in ships, of scare-crows in fields, &c., though I talked of rook-pie and rook-shooting and rookeries and being rooked; crow and rook being always, for country people, one and the same thing. In the same way I called a heron a heronshaw, a chaffinch a pink and a yellow-hammer a writing lark. Though this is not the same thing as confusing kestrel and sparrow-hawk, it shows how such a mistake can be almost constitutional. The superstition that cuckoo and hawk are the same bird is, by the way, an old one. Birds of the same colouring, size and general appearance were naturally bound to be confused. And last summer, as though it were true, I saw a dozen finches chasing with fury a solitary cuckoo, as if glad of the chance of finding a hawk by any other name.

* * * *

Miraculous March

March came in not merely like a lamb but like an angel. After an abnormally dry February the days, from the first to the sixth, had almost the lofty blue tranquillity of midsummer. The noons were really hot; one wrote out of doors from eight o'clock onwards. The spell, for England, was miraculous. Yet the spring seemed backward, the primroses extremely shy, daffodils not out, many trees of hazel still bearing catkins as stiff as frozen sausages. It is true that a Château de Clos Vougeot showed not only buds but a split of colour as fine as the wine itself, but there were no nests where, a year ago, nests were already far advanced. Roses, in fact, made too easy growth everywhere, but almonds seemed reluctant; there was no sign of blackthorn. The cause was the temperature at night. The frosts were intense. Days had ten hours of sunshine, but Tunbridge Wells could record a maximum and minimum, on the 4th, of 61 and 27 degrees. In country districts prophets revelled. "Nice weather? Too nice. I s'll be sucked in if we don't pay for it." They saw arctic tomorrows in May. "Fog in March, frost in May." On all sides the corn looked superb, the new ploughed land magnificent. "But you wait," they said.

Dormouse and Children

This miraculous spell is sure, pretty soon, to stir the dormouse out of his winter's anaesthetic. More squirrel than mouse, gentle and harmless, friendliest of creatures, he belongs more to the world of children than any animal I know. He is the sleepmouse in Southern counties, sleeper in some, dorymouse and dozing-mouse in others. In bracken districts his early summer nest is like a chance cluster of wind-balled bracken, easy but exciting to find, architecturally as masterly as the nest of tit or wren. He himself has a colour a shade lighter than the squirrel, pale fox-gold, with a faint creaminess underneath and bright blackberry eyes. Most grown-ups, I take it, already know all this, but the first sight of a dormouse for children is a rare experience. If you look for dormice, on warm spring evenings, among thickening clusters of honeysuckle leaves, take children with you; and have the good fortune, as I did, to see the child mistake the nest for the nest of a bird, to hear the cry of fear as the dormouse appears and runs up the bare arm, to watch fear turn to delight in the child and to fearlessness in the animal, until in tame tranquillity he sits ready to be stroked. A charming sight, an unforgettable meeting of small creatures.

* * * *

Country Schools

The problems of the country school child is one which continues to agitate country people. Country people are cast-iron conservatives on the subject of schools and are rightly jealous of their small schoolrooms where so many of their parish problems, after school hours, are often thrashed out. They resent, and perhaps rightly, the wholesale transportation of their children to town schools; the automatic closing-down of their own schools in consequence. Country schools, with their tiny attendances and intimate atmosphere, are, as I can testify, often very efficient. They solve the problems of people like myself, who for one reason or another cannot or will not send tiny children to superior and often inefficient private schools carried on, at suitable fees, in Edwardian villas in town suburbs. Like Sir Charles Trevelyan, I have an admiration for the country elementary school which I put into practice. Yet the miracle wrought in the children of country labourers when transported to town schools is astonishing. Country children are, odd though it may seem, often undersized and palpably undernourished. Fresh air does not, as many townspeople appear to think, replace good food, and hopelessly bad teeth, poor bone formation and stunted growth are all painfully evident in the majority of country school-children. A few months of a town school, with its one sound, well-cooked meal a day, works the miracle. But the fault is not, clearly, in the country school, but in country wages, country housing conditions and, again and again, country ignorance.

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Footpath Maps and Signs

The question of footpaths has long since been dealt with in admirable fashion by Essex, where footpaths and bridle-paths are marked by signposts. Here the walker knows his short cuts are safe, can feel himself in friendly countryside. He can ignore the most forbidding word in the language: Private. The Kent Council of Social Service, a body existing to promote and assist the provision of all kinds of social service for town, village and hamlet, now puts forward its own idea. It suggests a record of footpaths; further, and more important, a map. Such a map, exhibited in a public place, already exists at the village of Eynsford. Both schemes, signpost and map, are admirable. Why not combine them?—maps at pub. and church, signposts to punctuate the land itself. What a saving of truculence and temper, anger and apology, threat and counter-threat, wagging of irate deer-stalkers. Much invaluable material for walkers has, by the way, been issued by an organisation whose first concern is to try to induce people not to walk but to ride. London Transport issues, either free or at absurd prices, maps and guides of almost all the immediate countryside about London: guides marking out not only pub. and church and wood and castle, but also stiles, five-barred gates, poultry farms, watercress beds, paths and hedges.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

Country Housing

When a man gets a sizeable bee in his bonnet there comes a time when the bee must buzz out or himself bust. One of my sizeable bees is the question of country slums, to which I have often referred on this page. It is a bee which, I am glad to say, does not buzz in my bonnet alone. It pleases me, and it ought to please all country lovers, to hear it buzzing in no less a bonnet than that of the editor of *The Countryman*, who has let out the bee into the editorial columns of this quarter's number, and with considerable effect. "When the Ministry of Health's proposed subsidy of from £10 to £12 a year for forty years for new cottages becomes law there ought to be no difficulty in getting all the building done that is needed for the agricultural population. What that will mean to farming and to rural life only those of us know who live all the year round in the country." As he goes on to point out, to rely on the renovation of old cottages under the Housing, Rural Workers Act is not enough. Young and intelligent farm-workers' wives cry out, and very naturally, for decent standards of light, dryness and sanitation. They cry out for council houses, at the mention of which superior persons hold up mittened hands, talking of the ruin of rural beauty, agitated at the prospect of spoiling the view. My comment is that it is hard to admire the best view in England from a cottage with fungus growing like velvet under the parlour carpet, prehistoric sanitation and curtains down the middle of the bedrooms to segregate the sexes.

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The Ministry's View

But it is really good to see this urgent country problem taken up not only by an influential countryman, but realised also by the Ministry of Health. "Considerable improvement must be made in the standard of their (*i.e.*, country workers') housing," says the Ministry. The words have the bureaucratic sobriety you would expect from a Government report, but they combat the fatuity of a speaker, quoted by *The Countryman*, who declared "that rural housing was a 'fashion' which would be better 'in their private hands,' if not, indeed, 'postponed'." This attitude is not only fatuous but dangerous. If workers are to be kept on the land, and kept happily on it, they must be allowed the privilege of a decent standard of housing. Happily the Ministry realises this, and I hope local administrators will realise it and act wisely under the new legislation, which "gives us in the country," to quote *The Countryman* finally, "the power we need to act upon the basis of our knowledge and experience."

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An Early Egg

A correspondent reports a February egg, which he picked up unbroken. He describes it as pale blue and asks if such an egg is unusual in February and if I can identify it; he himself suggesting a starling. I have now had the very bad luck to mislay his letter, and I would anyway never guess at a bird's egg without seeing it. But it may interest him to know that it is always the eggs of starlings which I myself pick up unbroken on the lawn in spring, sometimes at the rate of several a day, and that it is said that a bird's egg is too light ever to break itself by falling on grass. It may interest him still further, since he writes from Oxford, to hear the story of a group of Dons (Cambridge, of course) who are reported to have collected a large number of thrushes' eggs in order to test this theory. The solemn occasion of these gentlemen tossing so many small blue eggs into the air and letting them fall on the sacred college grass is, I think, one of the age's major contributions to the study of ornithology.

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Forest Fires

Nobody, nowadays, seems to love the Forestry Commission, but it is surprising, sometimes, that the Commission is as patient with the public as it is. Forest fires, it reports, are already occurring at the rate of twenty per week. A dry February and a drier March are responsible for the inflammable state of heath and undergrowth, and as March goes on things are likely to be still more dangerous. These fires are caused almost entirely by irresponsible people, who either light picnic fires or behave on bracken-strewn land exactly as they behave, with cigarettes, on other people's carpets. The man who cannot light (and put out) a picnic fire without setting fire to a whole parish ought, I feel, never to trust himself with a match at all. Ironical to think that, of the few thousand acres of State-owned land that we still possess in this country, hundreds should be devastated every summer by the people to whom it virtually belongs. I hope the Forestry Commissioners' warning needs no underlining here.

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Bullfinches and Prunus

Rarely, by chance, birds make up with flowers some momentary colour scheme that is pure enchantment. It was not out of mere decorative idleness that oriental painters depicted birds and flowers so often together. Every now and then a gardener gets these flashed oriental effects for himself. In winter chaffinches, in flocks, break from the grey boughs of bare ash-trees like grey-pink flowers; in autumn they have a richer grey-pinkness against pink and purple of Michaelmas daisy foam. And all the later summer we see, at too rare intervals, the gold flash of goldfinches on the bright yellow anthemis daisies, the red and black and gold of bird brighter as the yellow gives way to the brown-gold of seed. About the same time blue-tits and sometimes an occasional bullfinch swing on the pink and lavender wands of godetia like flowers themselves. And yesterday we had a spring sight: a sudden squabbling of three bullfinches in a *prunus pissardii*, a flicker of plum-pink breasts boldly mingled for a second with pale bronze leaves and pink plum-flowers: a perfect moment.

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The Wild English Tulip

Last year I was able, by some judicious scepticism, to satisfy myself that the wild English gladiolus was not a myth. In response to a note on this page many correspondents wrote to say that they had seen it growing in Hampshire; and one, the Town Clerk of Romsey, had the kindness to send a few fresh sprays of flowers, delicate magenta pink, one day last summer. I would now like to do for *Tulipa Sylvestris*, the little yellow wild English tulip, what I have done for the gladiolus. My scepticism this time, however, is really genuine. As far back as 1790 Sowerby noted that no writer before him had included this tulip in the catalogue of English wild flowers, and himself included it "by the observations of the Rev. Mr. Mathew, who favoured us with this specimen from an old chalk-pit near Bury." He recorded it also as having been found, again in a chalk pit, near Norwich. Various nineteenth-century works continued to include it, but contemporary writers, so far as I can gather, no longer mention it. It flowers in April; is small, yellow and sweetly scented; has pale narrow leaves; droops its flower a little like a fritillary. I hope someone has had the luck to have seen it.

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Advisory Service for Parish Councils

In 1934 the National Council of Social Service set up a Parish Councils Committee. Its aim was to consider in what ways it could help parish councillors and parish council clerks to discharge their functions and if it could not stimulate the interest of village electors in affairs of local government generally and in the functions and responsibilities of parish councillors in particular. This was an excellent idea, and it has now been adopted in Kent, Yorkshire, Derbyshire, Essex, Cambridgeshire and Gloucestershire. In Kent, action has been taken on advice given on many subjects that trouble councillors: the payment of income tax on allotments, the holding of parish meetings on licensed premises, fire-brigade equipment, footpaths, liability of a parish council in regard to playground accidents, working-class housing, unsightly advertisements, and the very vexed question of the disposal of village refuse. This advisory service has been the subject of some criticism on the ground that it seeks to interfere with the rights of parish councillors and electors—all of which is exactly typical of rural mentality, which regards any privilege with complete indifference until it hears that it is about to lose it—but to my mind this service has many admirable virtues. The average parish councillor, when he opens his mouth or mind at all, is notoriously confused about his duties, and this service exists not to deprive him of privileges but to assist him in a clearer understanding and execution of them. Its present existence in only half a dozen counties is absurd.

H. E. Bates.

COUNTRY LIFE

Lost Land

The report of the Land Utilisation Survey, just issued, shows how, gradually but very surely, first-class agricultural land is being lost to the country. "The land of Britain is the nation's one great ultimate asset," it says, but elsewhere one reads that the acreage under cultivation has declined in the past six years by 1.7 per cent. Most of this decline is due to a complete disregard for the value of the soil as soil, and to its sale and exploitation as building land. It is an easy matter to convert a field to a factory or even a housing estate, but entirely another matter, in time of national emergency, to convert a derelict factory to a field of potatoes. Odd that it should be necessary to save England from the English, but from all sides there comes bitterly ironic evidence that it is so: rich land exploited for building, market-garden areas ruined by the exploitation of gravel. And then an unexpected cause of land-spoliation: the dog. That charming but so often useless animal, it seems, has destroyed, through sheep worrying, whole districts for sheep-farming. There is still another set of figures: although 41 per cent. of the population is on the land in France, 36 in Denmark and 31 in Germany, in England the figure is 7 per cent. I am not surprised at this; I am only surprised at the complacency, immense but tragic, which allows it; which also allows the loss, every year, of thousands of acres of English land, rich not only in beauty but in potential food. It is perhaps too much to hope that a nation should take an interest in the beauty of its own earth; but it might be reasonably expected to take an interest in the possibility, in time of emergency, of starving itself to death.

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Country Cheeses

My grocer, high-class, had a National Mark notice hung up behind the counter: Buy English Cheeses, Cheddar, Cheshire, Stilton, Leicester. Once, in Leicester itself, I had seen golden-orange globes of Leicester (I don't know of a better sight in a shop window than a fat whole cheese, unless it is a fat whole ham), but I had never tasted it. So now I asked for it. "Leicester?" the grocer said. "Never stock it. Never have stocked it." I pointed to the notice. "Nice fellow," I said. "How do you suppose I can be patriotic?" All this drew my attention to the question of English regional cheeses. There remain only, it seems, about a dozen of them; and of these about half, including Leicester, are mostly factory made. And of the rest the most exclusive, Double Gloucester and Blue Wensleydale, are to be found not where they should be found, in their native places, but largely in expensive West-End shops and holy-of-holy West End clubs. It has been said that a settled civilisation of long-standing is needed to produce great cheeses. Perhaps we, with our miserable dozen species, have not been civilised long enough; perhaps we are not civilised at all. On this basis of reckoning it is interesting to consider the Welsh, Scots and Irish. Wales produces, it seems, one decent cheese, Caerphilly, now almost entirely factory-made; Scotland one variety; the Free State several; Northern Ireland none at all. Perhaps some cheese-loving patriot can disprove this dreary record.

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A.R.P. in the Country

In the country there seems to be no lack of volunteers for Air Raids Precaution service, but there is a phlegmatic acceptance of things that is almost indifference. Recently I spent an hour giving an audience of villagers, as reticently and clearly as possible, the details of the duties expected of us, supplementing them with some details of Guernica, quoting the correspondent of *The Times*. At the close of the meeting there seemed, I thought, to be less enthusiasm than when it began. There were volunteers, but I did not notice a throwing-up of hats. Perhaps I myself was to blame. Where previous speakers had emphasised the great need for gas-masks, I deplored the emphasis on the danger of gas and the lack of emphasis on the danger of fire. If Guernica could be wiped out by incendiary bombs in three or four hours, gas not being used, a village of 250 inhabitants might be in flames in less time than it takes to draw a quart. Very few villages possess a fire-brigade; many no fire apparatus at all. In some cases the local mansion has its hose and hose-cart and its own adequate supply of extinguishers. But the great need in villages is clearly public fire apparatus, simple, efficient and handily placed in some public spot where its existence is known to everyone.

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Blacksmiths and Italy

The village blacksmith, once a supposedly romantic, hearty and prosperous part of any village, now has a tougher time of it. As though selling petrol, bikes, cigarettes, spare-parts and doing odd running repairs for motorists were not degrading enough to an art that is said to have flourished here in the tenth century, his best artistic work now has to meet foreign competition. There are few better things designed by English country craftsmen than a hinge or gate or a scroll of wrought iron, a pair of coal tongs or dogs in forged steel. Such craft, recently almost dead, has been revived slowly, by enthusiasm and teaching and economic assistance. It seems that it must now meet competition from Italy, where low wages and standards are enabling Italian firms to compete with the English blacksmith on terms which do not give him the remotest economic chance. It was virtually a Government Department, the Rural Industries Bureau, which by admirable organisation and enthusiasm gave the English blacksmith the chance of saving his craft from extinction. It is surely up to some other Government Department to see that that work has not been completely useless.

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The Soya Bean

I once pointed out, on this page, the dangers of investing capital in mushroom-growing companies who offered shares in £10 units which showed a profit of 10 per cent. This warning held good for certain apple-growing firms also, and the whole question of such companies has since been the subject of Government inquiry. Part of the cleverness of these companies was their choice of two superb table delicacies, which it was reasonable to suppose that a large public could not resist buying. Now the soya bean, the food with heaven knows what vitamins and a score of purposes, shows signs of replacing the mushroom and the Cox's Orange. I have no doubt that the soya bean is all that it is claimed to be, but what makes me suspicious of its financial opportunities is that the old formula is being used in the old alluring way. The soya bean is marvellous; *ergo*, a £10 unit at 10 per cent. can't be wrong. The only answer to this is that if you can grow beans or mushrooms or apples or flowers or anything else at a safe 10 per cent. profit, it is generally unnecessary to circulate the public in order to get your capital. As to the unit system itself, I see nothing against it. There is at least one Cox's Orange firm working that system with expert knowledge and success, but I do not think it promises 10 per cent.

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Far-off Things

Even more alluring, to the countryman, are those romantic seed and plant catalogues from Africa and India, New Zealand, California and Japan. They offer native seeds, freshly gathered, at absurd prices; alpine rarities at a tenth of the price of home-grown plants; lily bulbs as cheap as potatoes. They are all very, very alluring. Many are perfectly genuine. But there is a gentleman in Japan—perhaps he is now working on the gullible Chinese instead of on the gullible English—who still owes me one pound's worth of Japanese alpines and is, I suppose, likely to go on owing them yet. It was not a question of his not receiving the cash; I inquired about that. All easily allured gardeners should remember him.

H. E. BATES.

COUNTRY LIFE

The Wild Tulip

My query as to the existence in England of the wild tulip (*Tulipa Sylvestris*), made a fortnight ago, has met with unexpected success. Many correspondents have written reporting it from as far north as East and West Lothian and as far west as Somerset, and as far back in the last century as 1870. To all these correspondents I am very grateful. Among them was Miss V. Sackville West, who reported having seen it in the grass of an old orchard in Hampshire—the exact locality I shall naturally not give. Two other correspondents reported it from Hampshire, two from Dorset, two from Somerset, one from Yorkshire and two from Suffolk; Miss Sackville West had heard of it also from Bedfordshire, which is pleasant news to me. Perhaps the two most charming correspondents were also the oldest, a lady and a gentleman, neither afraid of admitting age, the gentleman sending a detailed report of the tulip from his Yorkshire school herbarium, "date the later 'seventies, perhaps earlier"; the lady wisely remarking that the home of the tulip in Dorset is "a very precious secret; kept, especially perhaps, from gentlemen of the Press, who have not as a class the reputation of discretion," hoping, I think, that at least one would belie that description, which he does. By far the most interesting letter came from Hampshire, reporting how a young couple had bought some land, built a house and had been astonished, before their garden had had time to be made, by the appearance everywhere of the wild tulip, which villagers reported had always been there. Bulbs were very deep, "an immense depth down," and at the base of one clump was found a Roman coin of the period of Trajan. Finally a lady from Berkshire sent details of the tulip in a series of charming pencil sketches, and from Scotland came two bulbs in flower.

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Garden Escapes

One correspondent is, and perhaps justifiably, very sceptical. "My own impression is that the plant is mostly, if not always an escape from cultivation in this country." He is probably right, but if he is right how does it happen that this delicate, shy-blooming thing should not only have escaped but survived? If it was once cultivated more widely and flowered more prolifically how does it happen that such an authority as Sowerby, for instance, does not mention it? This tulip, like some other species, seems to increase by means of offsets, often without flowering at all. Its survival as a wild plant brings up the very interesting question of other garden escapes. Why do some plants escape and persist in surviving, and not others? If *Tulipa Sylvestris* and montbretia and canterbury-bell and evening-primrose and pink primrose can escape and re-establish themselves as wild plants, how is it that it never seems to happen to such prolific garden seeders as poppy and marigold, Californian poppy and mullein? Plants that might seem to have a reasonable chance of successful escape, for instance, are hybrid anemones, frothing seed as light as thistledown; or the Peruvian lilies, cracking off with high explosions like amber bombs on the hot afternoons of July. Anthemis should have a chance of escape, and michaelmas daisy. Yet these lusty plants fail where the delicate tulip has, apparently, succeeded for at least a hundred and fifty years.

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Scottish Country

This page deals largely, and quite naturally, with English country life. For the last three or four weeks the B.B.C., whose broadcasts from English villages are too often of the pub-and-yokel kind, has been distinguishing itself by some splendid relays from remoter parts of Scotland. The broadcasts of life in Mull, Ardgour and Fort Augustus were all first-rate. I was struck by several things: the steady rate of de-population in almost every district (from Ardgour came figures of two marriages, on the average, solemnised each year); the warm praise for the Forestry Commission, thanks to whom that de-population was in some part being checked; and the intense pride of almost every speaker in his native countryside. Almost all of this was in direct contrast to English country life. And one other thing was still more in contrast. In thousands of English villages and English country towns you can hear the English language mauled and mouthed until it loses every inflexion of dignity or beauty. From these remote places in the West of Scotland it was possible to hear English spoken by lorry-drivers, fishermen, crofters, lighthouse men, post-mistresses and in fact by everybody, with a perfection that was an absolute delight.

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Lost Men

It is good news that 30,000 farm-workers in three counties—Sussex, Durham and Devon—are to receive higher wages, following the decision of the Agricultural Wages Board. Yet, as one newspaper pertinently points out, they will still be worse paid (far worse paid) than the man who sweeps the garbage off your streets. There is an old and very stupid reply to the grievance that farm labourers are atrociously underpaid. It is that farm workers get supplements in the form of free cottages, free milk, free firewood and, of course, free air. It may be that all or some of these things are true in all or some of thousands of cases. If the average children of the average English farm labourer are anything to judge by I very much doubt it. But even if it were true (and milk is still thrown to pigs and firewood lies corded and rotting on many estates), it would still not justify a wage of thirty-four shillings to a man who is too often expected to understand animals, land, crops, scythes, grass, weather, men and machines. On this basis the land will shortly have a problem not only of lost soil but lost men.

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A Perfect Month

When the dreary records of English weather are examined by future generations the month of March, 1938, will appear like an illuminated address. The whole month, at least as far as the 26th, has had some quality of illumination that has been lyrical. In the south it was so warm that by the middle of the month roses were bursting their buds on the walls of houses; delphiniums were in places tall enough to be staked, lilies grew at the rate of almost a foot a week; and in a small unheated greenhouse it was possible to germinate the hard bullet seeds of lupin in two days, a record for any time of the year. One other thing: it has been an *annus mirabilis* for all kinds of wild violet. The white have been as thick and large as snowdrops; the pale mauve and dark purple almost like banks of viola cornuta. The rare pink variety, perhaps a garden escape too, has been thicker and richer than ever. And finally, that cross between pale mauve and white, producing a kind of iris grey, the flowers like so many pale suspended moths. All have been as perfect as the warmest March ever recorded in these islands.

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A Comparison

It is interesting to compare this extraordinary spring with that of 170 years ago, for which Gilbert White kept a naturalist's calendar. This can be done by taking White's dates for the first appearance of certain common flowers. The year 1768 was the only one for which White kept a detailed record of flowering plants, and the year is known to have been backward. Even so the differences in the dates are very interesting. White reported blackthorn on April 7th and cowslip on April 3rd; this year the first was out by the middle of March, the second by March 25th (I hope this will be read by that hair-splitting critic who once admonished me for daring to describe them in flower together); he reported spurge-laurel and golden saxifrage on March 25th and March 27th; both were in full bloom before the middle of this March; he did not record ladies' smock until April 6th, whereas this year it was feathering every ditch and marsh, prolifically, a good three weeks earlier; he says nothing about dog's mercury until April 5th, a surprising date, since one began to look for it successfully by the end of February; and it was not until April 23rd that he observed the wild strawberry, yet I am confident of a recollection of finding it in February. I cannot find his reference to pink campion, which was fully in flower here on or about March 23rd, but his wych elm was a good month late. There were points on which, however, I think that White did score. I like his Brimstone butterfly on February 13th, his small tortoiseshell on January 27th, and his "gossamer floats" on February 4th.

H. E. BATES.