GET RID OF

GAMEKEEPERS and SOCIETIES

and the pigeons and rabbits will go too,
says JOHN CHERRINGTON

WHEN the Government, fearful of
pressure from the animal lovers,
made it an illegal act to spread myxo-
matosis, it automatically made the
extinction of rabbits an impossibility and
at the same time turned into criminals
a good many otherwise law-abiding
farmers. As compensation for having
removed the one sure method of control
there is a subsidy for rabbit-clearance
societies.

But these are themselves hamstrung in
various ways. They cannot legally make
use of myxomatosis as a method of con-
trol, they cannot use gin traps, and they
are not compulsory on all farmers and
landowners.

There is some pressure to make the
sale of rabbits illegal, as was done in
New Zealand. This would be an un-
enforceable provision in any case, and
would provide no answer. Very few
people today can possibly make a living
out of the sale of rabbits. And it's most
doubtful in this age of full employment
if many young people would take it
as a living. Especially as the
most effective methods of destruc-
tion, still used in New Zealand, poison
and gin traps, are denied them here.

Plenty of Noise

So far our Rabbit Clearance Societies
are making a fair bit of noise and are
not, I submit, killing a great many
rabbits. As they are not compulsory the
non-co-operators refuse to join, and to
make matters worse many shooting
owners refuse to allow their woods to be
invaded by the Society's operators. In-
stead, they are allowed to do their own
destruction with their own keepers.

This is a fundamental mistake. Keepers, in my experience, are possibly
the worst pest destroyers in the world.

Of course, they fill their pantries with
stoats, weasels, crows and the like, but
who ever saw a rabbit hung up even in
these days? All they kill are the enemies
of the rabbits.

I could confidently guarantee the
abolition of our two major pests,
rabbits and pigeons, if, as a prelimin-
ary, I was allowed to abolish all game-
keepers. Pigeons only nest in our
woods and hedges with such abund-
ance because the "vermin" have been
ruthlessly destroyed.

The question of the gin trap is one
of some delicacy. If it had been illegal
for domestic dogs and cats to trespass
on other people's land no one would
have said a word if their pet had come
home with a damaged foot. After all,
dozens of cats are killed and maimed
on the roads every day, but no one has
suggested making cars illegal.

Gin traps

I must say I don't like gin traps.
When we used to use them I insisted
that they were frequently inspected, but
I don't believe they are in themselves
any more cruel than any other method
of destroying vermin.

Shooting leaves many rabbits to creep
off and die. Gassing is acceptable only
because we don't watch the death
agonies in the depth of a burrow. A
snare is not the quick despatch that
people seem to imagine. At best it's
strangulation, at worst it can be a long
drawn-out agony, worse in a way than
the gin, because the rabbit is caught by
the body and not by a foot.

I think the way to look at the
problem is that the rabbit, like the rat,
the mouse, and other pests is an enemy
of farming and hence of all people who
eat food. Our enemies have to be
destroyed in order that we all can live.
No one sheds a tear for the rat which is allowed to be poisoned with impunity. It's only the rabbit that seems to arouse the anger of the animal lovers.

**Hypocritical**

Yet their anger is so hypocritical. At the height of the myxomatosis row, which, if you remember, coincided with the final abolition of the gin trap, one prominent animal lover, in all other respects a most sensible man, threatened in conversation with me that if farmers persisted in destroying their rabbits in this way, then the enraged British public would boycott British food.

I believe they would, too. And go on making use of the products of countries like Australia and New Zealand where, of course, every possible variation of humane and inhumane methods of destruction are not only tolerated but encouraged by the authorities.

But to return to our Societies. They are incapable of containing the rabbit plague without the recurring onset of myxomatosis. The only system of destruction that seems available to them is gassing. This at best is only moderately successful as there is some doubt as to whether the gas penetrates into the burrows sufficiently far to kill all the rabbits. But the most serious drawback to gassing, even if 100 per cent effective is that it only affects rabbits that are to ground.

I just don't believe these stories of rabbits that have turned to living on top of ground because of the gassing of burrows or myxomatosis. Large numbers of rabbits always lived on top of the ground.

**At Our Expense**

The only time these are to ground is when they are breeding, and then as their stops are usually in the corn or under other dense growth they are fairly invulnerable. In the old days the way to deal with these was by open gin trapping in the Spring. Now they just breed away happily to do more damage, and to provide the operators of the Rabbit Clearance Societies further employment at ours and the Government's expense.

All in all then the Societies don't seem to make much impression on rabbit numbers. In fact, I would say that they do as much harm in preventing the spread of myxomatosis by making burrows uninhabitable as they do good. My experience is that rabbits always return, that their numbers increase gradually to a certain point and then there is a recurrence of myxomatosis and practical extinction.

Contrary to popular belief there is no evidence that the disease is in any way less severe, simply that as there are fewer rabbits about the spread is less effective.

**Try Nature**

In France, where myxomatosis first appeared in Europe nine years ago there has been practically no widespread reappearance of the rabbit in any number, and the disease reappears almost when required as numbers rise, without human aid.

I suggest that the best policy here would be to let the Societies lapse and see if nature can keep them in check.

With grateful acknowledgments to the author and the "Farmer and Stockbreeder".

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