

Silver-grey Rabbit.

Some persons have pointed to the introduction of the silver-grey rabbit, which, by crossing with the present common wild rabbit, and thereby improving the marketable value of its skin, would materially assist in the expense of extermination. But, so far as our observations and inquiries have extended, the climate in this part of New Zealand is not favourable to the development of this species. Experience has proved this on the eastern slopes of the Hokonui Hills, where the silver-grey rabbit was for years located in large numbers—undisturbed by the common rabbit—till within the last two years it has become almost extinct. This sudden disappearance, it is surmised, is the result of the last two severe winters.

Land in Hundreds.

The land in the Hundreds, it has been suggested, requires a similar treatment to that on the runs, namely, a compulsory unity of action. Here it is found that the holding of large tracts by the New Zealand and Australian Land Company, and others who, it appears, do nothing to exterminate, militates against the endeavours of the smaller holders who are compelled in self-defence to use every exertion, but are paralyzed by the inactivity of their larger neighbours.

Not kept down by Population without Compulsory Action.

That the rabbits are not kept down by population is reported to be apparent from the futile exertions of the farmers to protect their young crops, and this in the infancy of the plague. One farmer on the Limestone Plains, Western District, had, we are informed, six men night and day to protect his barley field till the crop had grown strong enough to resist the inroads of the rabbits. He saved a large portion of it, but at a cost which must have considerably affected the return he obtained from the sale. A large farmer living in the vicinity of Winton informed us he had a hard fight to get his wheat a fair start. Having had it eaten down two or three times, he tried poison with but partial success, men and dogs being unable to cope with the rabbits.

Around the frontage of Long Bush, the sod fences, particularly where sown with gorse, are honey-combed with burrows; the bush itself affording a friendly covert, in which rabbits are rapidly increasing. In the Oteramika and Lothian Districts, particularly in the former, they are swarming, and can be seen in droves on the Company's extensive holdings, in which they disport undisturbed, a cause of large expense and labour to the smaller farmers. Once fairly established in the Seaward Bush and that clothing the left bank of the Makarewa River—which bound these plains on the north and south—their eradication will be almost an impossibility. In the Waianiwa District, on the banks of the Oreti, where the settlement is considerable, all the farmers being small, the best chance the settlers have of keeping the rabbits within bounds is by the frequent flooding of the low lands, when they are easily destroyed as they swim about, and their young are drowned in the holes. And it must be remembered that the loss sustained by the farmers in material and labour has only been felt during the last two years. The numbers of the rabbits have very sensibly increased this year. Indeed, in all parts of the district it is universally recognized that the rabbit nuisance, or, as it might more appropriately be termed, plague, is only commencing.

VII.—SUMMARY.

To summarize: So determinedly and impartially has the rabbit extended its peregrinations that no locality, from the river bank to the highest mountain top, appears unvisited. Already riding after stock is attended with danger, owing to the ground being perforated in all directions with its warrens, and the railway embankments rendered unsafe. The expense to the runholder is becoming one of such serious import, that any sudden fall in the price of wool might determine the conflict with his small pest by his hopelessly withdrawing from the contest from inadequacy of means to continue it. It is not merely the large burden he has to bear in paying away on an average 3d. to 4d. a skin, on which during eight months in the year he can realize nothing, but each month finds him less able to disburse, from his losses in breeding sheep and increase, owing to the impaired capacity of his country, that not eaten up being polluted, while the wool he has is deteriorated in quality.

Export of Wool.

The export of wool from the Southland District has fallen off in one year to the extent of 800 bales, with every prospect of its being further diminished, and that materially. Such a decadence affects not merely a class, but the community. Wool is, and will be for years, the great export of the Southern portion of New Zealand. Any great decrease in it means a withdrawal of large capital, which bears upon the life of every industry, whether in country, town, or seaport, and it becomes a public calamity, which, when continued, no fictitious stimulus can avert.

Loss of Revenue.

The cost to the Government in loss of revenue is already felt in that part of Otago where the stock is assessed: it will become still more apparent when, on the termination of the present leases, the country is again sought to be let. The proposition that by cutting up the large holdings into 5,000-acre lots, and thereby settling a larger population, is stated to be met by the fact that the present holder of, say, 50,000 acres, having means at command, employs from fifteen to eighteen men whose sole occupation is to exterminate rabbits, pays them well for their exertions, finding them in most cases with dogs, ammunition, and sometimes in provisions, and yet realizes the difficulty mastering him. Supply the place of this one proprietor by ten men, and we have a smaller population by five or eight to work out the problem at their own expense, support their families, fence in their holdings (which, after all, as the plains and uplands are already freeholds, can be little else than summer country), and pay the Government a higher rental than that obtained from the present lessees.