

The opossum-fur industry has wide possibilities, but its trade value is yearly depreciating owing to the poor breeding-stock remaining in the forested areas. To enable the industry to maintain a high standard of fur-product it is probably desirable that new blood be imported and liberated. Before this is done, however, the Government requires to be assured that the opossum is not harmful to native bird-life. A thorough investigation should be made of the life-habits of these animals in New Zealand, as the question is of great importance and has a direct bearing upon the formulation of working-plans for each State forest.

An experiment has been commenced in the Wellington Region by the demarcation of one State forest into twenty suitable opossum-trapping areas. The trapping-rights and general supervision, control, and protection over these blocks for five seasons will be ballotted for by selected applicants. It is hoped by this means to procure regular employment for a number of seasonal workers, to reduce the administrative work caused through the large number of applicants desiring trapping-rights, to prevent the destruction of immature opossums, and to increase the efficiency of trappers.

The total revenue and share of licenses paid to the State Forest Account amounted to £4,740 19s. 7d., an increase of £653 compared with the year 1927-28. The whole of this revenue was applied towards the cost of destruction of deer, pigs, and goats in the State forests, and to the protection of native bird-life.

Deer.

The payment of a bounty of 2s. per tail has been continued. In Nelson Region 2,564 tails were received; in Southland, 3,370; Canterbury-Otago, 3,837; Westland, 560. Fifty-three red deer were also destroyed in Golden Downs Plantation, Nelson; 41 were shot in the Rotorua plantations, and 70 on Stewart Island: a total for the year of 10,495.

The establishment of "salt licks" has not yet proved successful in indigenous forests, but there is definite evidence that deer are attracted to the licks in the exotic plantations.

Deer-destruction is now being carried out systematically by parties under Forest officers in all infested areas. Assistance is being given by exporters in testing the world's markets for the utilization of hides, horns, and venison, with a view to enhancing the commercial value of the pest and in order that a reduction in numbers may be achieved at as low a cost as possible.

An official party was engaged in the Lilburn Valley, Southland Region, for a period of three months, during which time 353 red deer were destroyed. In the Blue Mountains Plantation (Canterbury-Otago Region), in which the depredations of fallow deer have been very severe, an official party during a period of three weeks shot approximately four hundred. An official shooting party is at present being organized in the southern portion of the Nelson Region. The anticipated result of this experiment is the destruction of a further one thousand deer. The Service has made arrangements in this region to collect deer-hides and to forward them to various exporters in an endeavour to increase the demand overseas.

The sale value of red-deer hides ranges from 4s. to 5s. 3d. each, according to size and the method of fleshing and drying. There is undoubtedly a good market for medium-sized well-dried red-deer hides for utilization in fine leather-work. Certain overseas manufacturers have been favourably impressed with the qualities of these hides, and it is anticipated that values will increase in the near future.

An experimental shipment of fallow-deer hides was also made, but so far the results have not been successful as a business proposition. Fresh avenues, however, are now being explored.

There is no doubt that at the present time deer constitute the most serious menace to the State-owned forests, and in consequence of their great numbers the forest-floor has in many places been completely despoiled. In many parts of New Zealand regeneration has disappeared, and the plants which furnish most of the honey and berries upon which native birds subsist have been completely destroyed. Deer-destruction has not yet overtaken the annual increase of the herds; malformation is prominent, and good heads are not obtainable in many districts.

Probably the damage is most apparent in high country, above the bush-line. The major alpine plants are obviously a staple diet, and the formation of screes at the headwaters of snow-fed rivers is accelerated and increased in area by the removal of this vegetation. Increased erosion and larger deposits of detritus on low country are the direct result. The true remedy for much of the present high-country erosion, particularly in Canterbury, is afforestation with high-altitude species for protection purposes. This remedy is quite impossible of application in deer-infested country, as the young trees are immediately eaten out.

Notwithstanding the efforts made by some of the acclimatization societies to control this pest, it has reached such proportions, and constitutes such a grave danger to the perpetuation of our native flora and fauna, that it is now a national problem and should be nationally controlled.

From the purely departmental point of view, it would appear that the Forest Service is carrying the chief financial burden of deer-control, and this expenditure must be reflected in the future cost of timber from exotic plantations.

Goats.

Goats constitute a menace to the Taranaki, Wellington, Nelson, and Canterbury forests, and field officers have been instructed to carry rifles and energetically carry out goat-destruction.

Experimental shipments of hides have been sent overseas, and it is hoped that favourable prices will be received.

The browsing habits of these animals render them second only to deer as destroyers of forest regeneration, and additional sums are necessary to engage shooting parties and to issue free ammunition in certain badly infested areas.