

THE GAME FIELD

By EDWYN SANDYS

AS a rule, it is safer to make a forecast after you have quietly collared a few fawns, but unfortunately the needful are not always at hand. As usual, I have been corresponding with men at widely-separated points, my main question being in regard to the welfare of the Bobwhites. This time, I regret to say, the responses have been neither as prompt nor as cheerful as has been the rule, and this causes misgivings, because anything like uncertainty is ominous. The remark of one close observer, whose judgment of such matters I know to be of the best, probably will apply to many northern districts. He says: Regarding quail, I am very doubtful, as I have been unable to get direct word from farmers outside of my own territory." I am afraid that the reason is easy to guess. This has been one of the severest winters I can recall in some twenty-five years' close connection with matters directly bearing upon upland sport. Yet, in spite of bitter cold and heavy snowfall, it has not been what might be termed a typical "quail-killer." The cold has been uniform; consequently the snow has stayed long. But that, while of course unfavorable, is not the worst of conditions. Given a deep snow, the worst event is a heavy rain, changing to sharp cold with a few hours of decided calm. A mild spell with rain ending in high winds and zero temperature is not so bad as many people imagine. And for this reason: strong wind not only is a great drier, but it also shakes all moisture from brush and weeds, instead of leaving them heavily coated with ice—the case when a sudden nip follows a thaw without wind. Then every weed and bit of possible food is rendered as useless as though it were inside a glass jar, and birds, already poor in condition, are unable to survive the period till another change frees the supplies. Thus far I have heard nothing of the deadly crust. When a strong crust forms late in the season it plays the mischief, particularly where birds can get under snowy brush, and thus be imprisoned.

The inference therefore is that the mortality among the birds will not be unusually heavy, unless what is left of the winter should show sudden changes from rain to severe cold. That would be the worst thing possible, because it would catch the birds in a rundown condition. To those sportsmen who by location have the power to render service, I would say: If you have not put out any food, put out a little now, and if you have been feeding, feed just a little more—good, sound grain in the proper spots. Since the natural foods are exhausted, the cold snap at the end of winter may be the deadliest week of the season, and it should be a sportsman's duty to provide against such a possibility. Two northern-bred birds, saved upon their native ground, are better breeding stock than four brought at the last moment from the South.

But if, after all, the birds of a district have been winter-killed, it becomes an entirely different proposition. Southern birds are far better than none at all, and a little judicious importing will fill many a gap.

The Bobwhite is the best of all our birds for a cover country. Hardy, prolific, exceedingly useful in many ways, and practically non-migratory, it is quite within our power to forever keep him with us. Timber-cutting, drainage, etc., may, and probably will, eventually doom the ruffed grouse, the woodcock and the snipe, but no improvement need, of necessity, interfere with the welfare of the Bobwhite. He is no dodger of human association, but rather a follower of the plow. The more big grainfields, the surer is his food supply and the better his chances; for it indeed will he a queer-looking country in which he cannot find at least fences for his humble shelter. Should so unfortunate a time ever arrive, something of the fine lesson taught by our pisciculturists might be applied to this bird, and it is quite within the possibilities that one day there will be "bobwhite hatcheries" under as competent management as are trout-hatcheries of to-day.

It is not impossible to do with the Bobwhite something at least of what has been done with his remote kin, the pheasant. If we old fogies of the now could happen back one hundred years hence, we might be vastly astonished to find our great-great-greats handling such matters in a practical, matter-of-fact way, and by means of the certain output of hatcheries, being as assured of their Bobwhite shooting as are we of our trouting. Personally, I wouldn't fear to undertake the stocking of a county with Bobwhites, nor would it be either an outrageously expensive or difficult job. In fact, it probably would prove a profitable enterprise; for the birds are anything but niggardly in the matter of progeny. A judicious mixture of quail knowledge and netting might show net results of no uncertain value. That affair up the Bronx has taught a few useful lessons, and the day is not so distant when certain principles therein exploited may prove "ketchin'."

From the last sporting season a few valuable pointers have been learned, one of which seems to be that the average local game-guardian is about as much real use as a tombstone. In too many cases his principal business appears to rival that of the tombstone by indicating that some time in the past there used to be a real live man somewhere in the neighborhood. In more than half the cases one scarcely can blame the local man. More times than not some little local pull is behind his appointment, and not infrequently his backers are actuated by a kindly desire to do something for a John Henry who has betrayed no spectacular ability in the line of doing things

for himself. This sort of material makes the worst kind of "gardeen fur enny-thin, let alone quails an' partridges an' sech!" John Henry may or may not have long been accustomed to the guardianship of liquid cereal, and from sheer force of habit be unwilling to disappoint a sport who requests him to do the favor of taking charge of a few slugs more. Be that as it may, or be the guardian as good a man as there is in his county, he needs must be human, and human nature ever has favored those who can return the compliment, as it hates to make trouble in its own little world. In towns, especially small towns, it is an extremely difficult thing to find a man, above all a man really fitted for the post of game warden, who can and will properly enforce a game law where an intimate associate, or a more or less close relation or connection, is concerned. In every sporting center are men whom it is impossible to convince of the wrong of breaking a game law, and these men are apt to poison a dozen others. They argue with themselves: "Just a little monkeying with no harm in it at all; the law is meant for serious offenders, not for a chap just after a little fun like me; thousands of better men than I do it, and if I don't, why somebody else surely will,"—and so on. Usually the game warden, if not one of these men, is a friend to them, and only when compelled will he take action against one of them. This sort of thing means—and it happens every year—an occasionally deaf and blind game warden, a lot of illegal killing, and a vicious example both for men inclined to respect the law and for the young idea learning to shoot. Nine-tenths of the game wardens are a heap keener to nab some unknown and supposed-to-be-rich visiting outsider, than to bring a well-known local sinner to justice; this is only natural, because in the case of the outsider there is small chance of any after unpleasantness; but with the local offender it is an entirely different matter. Even if he be not a personal friend, he is almost certain to have friends who are friends of etc., etc., and the warden knows that if he does his duty he can expect only the old, old "getting hunk" at the first opportunity. I have talked with wardens who have not hesitated to declare that were it not for local influences, they assuredly would unflinchingly perform their duties; but, as it was, for one reason and another, there were cases when the proper course was impossible. The sole remedy appears to be the careful selection of the men and then sending them to districts where they can be absolutely free from the embarrassments of friendship, kinship, or any other ship that hampers duty. Then and then only can we reasonably expect a qualified man to perform his duties in that rigid and impartial manner which the necessities demand.

Which is the best shooting eye? The question was prompted by a recent discussion, which in turn arose from an extremely

personal remark by a friend who said: "That hubble-eyed beggar can't help seeing straight!" For a long time I had the notion that a deep-set steel-blue, or gray, eye was about the best, but a field experience taught me that at least one pair of the so-called black eyes was amazingly keen. The owner of them was the typical swarthy, coal-thatched chap, whose appearance suggested the Indian rather than the actual French cross. I have lain with that man time and time again in a goose-blind, and when my apparently excellent and certainly quick eyes could detect the tell-tale black thread floating against the sky, he would almost invariably say: "Here come seven," or whatever number of geese were in the flock; and after they had drawn considerably nearer, my count would verify his statement. Like myself, he was a quick, nervous-tempered chap, but never performed in a way likely to foster any profound respect for his shooting. The best field shot I know has a grayish eye with a peculiar greenish glint in it; a lightning-quick performer has rather prominent light blue eyes, and a couple of others have dark blue peepers which appear to focus a bird mighty well. A four-handed party on Lake Manitoba last fall boasted a blue pop-eye you could almost see behind; a bigger pop-eye that seemed to change color from grayish to brownish; a pair of genuine black ones and a pair of grays. The bubble-eyes seemed to have a bit the best of it. It might not be a bad idea carefully to note the color of the eyes of the experts in the next big trap affair when the cracks at the targets are gathered together. I have a suspicion that color will prove a poor guide, but others appear to think differently.

A young correspondent has asked two questions: "What do you think of live-pigeon shooting?" and "Is artificial-bird shooting good practice for the field?" In regard to the first question, it doesn't greatly matter what I think of live-bird shooting. The opinion of a host of excellent people is sternly against it—in fact, I might say conclusively, public opinion is against it. So far as targets are concerned, I can see no reason why they should not improve one's field shooting, but if I had that object in view, I certainly should hold the gun below the elbow until the word was given. The practice at getting the gun smoothly and swiftly into the firing position should prove very useful for the field. Such target-shooting unquestionably should better one's all-round work. It encourages quickness, decision, and general handiness—an invaluable quality. A young aspirant who can account for half his targets thrown according to rule, should not disgrace himself on upland game where a season's average of one-half the birds would be really excellent shooting. The targets would not be so useful for wild-fowl because the action differs broadly. The holding well ahead and the even swinging of the gun till

the charge has left the muzzle are what best count on web-footed game; these things the targets do not greatly encourage. One of the chief drawbacks of the target is that it is a somewhat false proposition, inasmuch as its speed decreases as it advances, while the reverse is apt to be true of the live mark.

Again has come up the question of having one open season for all kinds of game in a certain locality, and the more one looks at existing conditions, the more reasonable appears the proposition. One of the surest methods of checking wrong is to remove, or to decrease, both opportunity and temptation, and this a uniform season would go far to do. For instance, if a man goes into a cover in which one game is lawful in September and another not till October, what is likely to happen to the October bird that pets up two weeks before its season opens? While many men would not deliberately start after a bird before the law allowed, not so many will hold their hand should that bird flush while they were seeking other lawful quarry on the same ground. If all upland game came in and went out on the same days, there would be no possibility of making mistakes and the same rule applied to waterfowl would greatly simplify matters. To allow a man to go into cover after woodcock while grouse and quail may flush and, theoretically, be safe, is taking chances. Few men, unless they really want to, can tell quail, or young grouse, from cock, especially when the latter bird is as scarce as he is to-day. Suppose mallard came in August 15th, teal September 1st, and woodduck September 15th, how many men could, or would strain themselves trying to distinguish one from the other as the wings hissed past? The good old "Lead us not into temptation" is a double saturated solution of common sense in this case.

The license law in Maine appears to have worked in a thoroughly satisfactory manner. At a meeting of the Maine Sportsmen's Fish and Game Association, it was shown that the game, the guides, and the guests had all benefited thereby. There has been some talk of the law injuring the guides and the proprietors of camps, The reverse seems to have been the case. The reports of the guides, according to Commissioner Carleton, show that they guided two thousand more days, guided more non-residents, and earned \$9,000 more than during any previous year. The estimated earnings of the guides the past season were about \$300,000, which appears to be good negotiable testimony that sound game protection is a bit more than the fad which a few of the yet unenlightened are pleased to consider it.

Pennsylvanian sportsmen are well satisfied with the working of their game laws. The

consensus of opinion is that during the past year the laws were better enforced than at any previous time. A very cheering note refers to the apparent increase of song and insectivorous birds. That the good work may go on is the wish of every lover of nature. One of the greatest pests in the country is the poaching Italian, who seems to have no idea of right or wrong where anything in feathers is concerned. The Pennsylvania law actually has checked this fellow; hence it needs must be good.

Not a few of the snarls of game protection might be straightened out by the abolition of the pump-gun and any and all other shot-guns with greater capacity for mischief than the regulation double-barrel. Of course, one cannot blame the makers, so long as the law allows the use of a machine which, while it is deadly in skilled hands, has an ugly tendency to encourage a reckless blazing away as long as a slim chance of crippling something may remain. The great trouble with a pump is that it means a lot more wounded creatures; for few men will cease trying while they can throw lead as far as the mark. The act is there is nothing for true sportsmanship or the welfare of game in any attempt to increase a man's killing capacity. With the numbers of sportsmen rapidly increasing, we should, instead of encouraging any appliance to aid the slaughter, rather bend our efforts in the opposite direction, even though it led to the elimination of all rapid-fires and one barrel of the popular double arm. As it is, the game is getting the worst of it in too many places, but the wonderful improvement in protection during the past two years augurs well for the chances of our sons in the field their fathers loved so well. I'm no faddist about feathered things, but I always have favored the strict protection of insectivorous and song birds, and a wise amount of the same for whatever Nimrod claims as his own.

To the young sportsman who got hold of a nice well-broken puppy in time for last season's shooting, I would say, Don't make the too common mistake of allowing a promising young dog to run all over the country because there happens to be no immediate call for field work. There are far too many dog-owners who appear to think that the end of the shooting season should bring one long holiday for the dog that has done well for perhaps three months, and so soon as the gun is put away all discipline is relaxed. This sort of treatment is apt to mean a more or less spoiled dog before the next shooting swings round. Of course, there is no sense in keeping a dog anywhere near fine during the close season, but too much liberty may be as great a fault in the other direction. What he needs is plenty of regular exercise—freedom without loss of control.