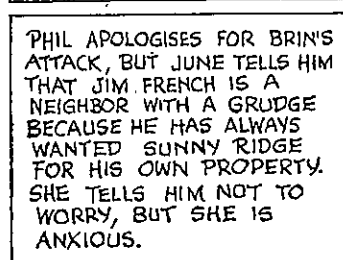
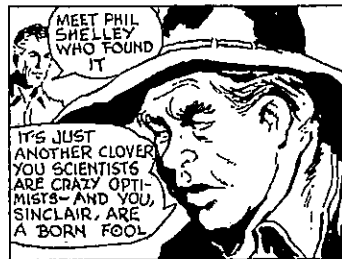
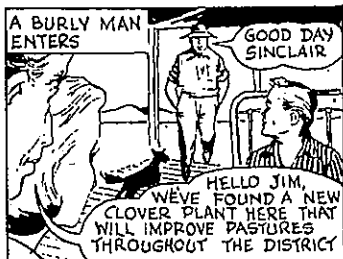


The Adventures of
PETER AND PAM
 of Sunny Ridge

Phil Shelley, scientist, hurt his leg finding a rare clover plant near Sunny Ridge station. Peter, Pam and their father bring the plant for Phil to see.



NEXT MONTH: PETER TURNS DETECTIVE.

COUNTRY
JUNIOR

Adventure on Mutton Bird Island

By Eric Worrell

On Flinders Island, in the Bass Strait, between Tasmania and the Mainland, school children receive an extra holiday known as the "Birding Holiday."

But it's not a holiday from work!



Author holds a black tiger snake and a mutton bird he caught in the same burrow. Two men were later bitten by snakes on the island.

The Bass Strait Islands are famous for their mutton bird industry. Every year millions of mutton birds fly from the northern hemisphere, sometimes as far off as Siberia. With unerring navigation they arrive at the islands in September to nest usually in the same burrows as they did the year before. Between the 25th and 27th November, each hen bird, although no bigger than a sea-gull, lays a single egg as big as a duck egg. On the 26th November, islanders call the particularly productive day "the glut of the eggs." By March the young chicks have hatched,

are rolling fat and covered with thick grey fluffy down. Due to the heavy layers of fat they are bigger than their parents. At this stage the flesh of the bird is of particularly delicate flavour and is sought after by professional "birders," who take the young birds from their burrows, dress them, and sell them in barrels of brine to canning factories in Tasmania and New Zealand. This delicacy is known as "squab in aspic." Last mutton birding season I was a guest of one of Flinders Island's leading mutton-birders. I was accompanied by a friend from the Murray River, Eric



Roy Goss with young mutton bird.

West. Roy Goss, the mutton-birder, has a thriving farm on Flinders Island, and supplements his income by mutton-birding between 23rd March and 30th April. This is where we come back to the school holidays.

Mutton-birding is an entire family effort. It is traditional work on the Bass Strait Islands and in the old days when mum and dad went "birding" they could not very well leave their children behind, so they took them away from school for the four weeks of the season so they could sail to the rookeries with their parents. Educational authorities were alarmed at first, so they did some swift thinking and came out with the obvious solution, a month's holiday for all school children.

On March 10th we loaded Goss' twenty-four foot fishing boat and sailed to a rookery on Chappell Island about sixteen miles from Flinders Island. This trip was to unload heavy supplies of salt for pickling the birds, wood for fuel and drums of water as there is no natural water or timber on the desolate isle.

We were back in Flinders Island that night, where most of the population were preparing to sail for the various island rookeries.

On the 22nd March we again loaded the tiny boat with provisions and set out into the stormy strait for Chappell Island. The mutton-birders consisted of Roy Goss, his wife and two daughters, Marie (15) and Ruth (13). He was accompanied by Mark West and his wife, with fourteen-year-old daughter, Lena, and eight-year-old son, Darrell. The West family were working for the Goss family.

Eric West and I had another purpose on the island. We were there to catch giant black tiger snakes for research purposes.

Although Chappell Island is the most prolific rookery in the Furneaux Group, the Goss team are the only ones who will mutton-bird on the island these days. It has a sinister history of death, dealt out by the numerous tiger snakes that live in the burrows with the young birds.

When mutton birds are very small they are eaten by the giant tiger snakes, which grow to over six feet. Mutton birds grow quickly, however, and tiger snakes learn to live in harmony in the same burrow as a growing bird. At this stage they prove useful to the birds, eating rats that could otherwise wipe out the rookery. Every time a mutton-birder pushes his arm down a burrow to bring out a young bird he risks a bite from a tiger snake that may be inside the burrow. A few years ago Mrs. Goss' uncle died from the bite of a tiger snake he received on Chappell Island.

In a shed on the island the birds which were caught and killed by the men were processed by the women and children.

The working day started at dawn. Goss and West carried long sticks called "spits." They stuck these in the ground near the burrows, then laying on their backs, pushed their arms down the burrows as far as they could reach and dragged out the fat chicks.

They killed the birds with a quick flick that dislocated the neck and threaded them by the lower beak on to the spits. All this time the adult birds were at sea, feeding and filling their crops with plankton, or microscopic sea life, to feed their young when they returned at dusk.

Fifty birds on a spit was considered a load and weighed over a hundred pounds.

Back at the shed, the family quickly dealt with the hundreds of birds, so that at the end of the day they looked like row after row of white plum puddings.

At the final stage the birds are stacked in barrels, about six or seven hundred to each barrel and sealed. Brine, dense enough to float a potato is poured through the bung, which is then stoppered.

At the end of the season small coastal vessels pull into the islands and take off the barrels of pickled birds. Each company supplies barrels to its own birders, and pays them at the rate of £5 per hundred birds. Mutton bird oil, a by-product is sold for £11 a 44-gallon drum and is used as a base for embrocations and cooking oil. The feathers bring a shilling each pound for mattresses and pillows.

Despite adverse weather we were able to catch over a hundred black tiger snakes within a week. We found them outside the mutton bird burrows and caught them as they slithered down to elude us. We grabbed them by the tails and dropped them into calico or hessian bags. We found that by working in front of the birders we could catch them before they were frightened into their burrows. This also meant that birders had less chance of being bitten. Although tiger snakes are one of Australia's deadliest species, those from Chappell Island were not particularly aggressive, and were feeding from our hands a week after capture.

Scientists have kept a close watch on mutton birds to ensure that the industry does not work itself out. Mutton birds have withstood generations of onslaught, first from Aborigines, then the early sealers, who trapped the birds in pits in thousands, boiled them down for oil and threw away the rest. Today birders work under the supervision of government ornithologists. The rookeries are sanctuaries for all except four weeks of the year, and every mutton-birder, including children over the age of ten years, pays £2 each for a birding licence.

The birds are longlived, and for this reason there is no danger of the species becoming extinct. Dr. D. L. Serventi, government scientist investigating the industry, says birds do not breed until they are five to ten years old, and that despite the fact that mutton-birders account for half a million birds each season, it is only a fraction of the number of nests that they overlook. Many millions live to mature.

One day Roy Goss was away longer than usual and I started for the shed door to check on him. As I did I heard a call from outside. Goss was there with blood running from a gash on his wrist. There was a length of rope twisted above the elbow.

Snake bite.

Mrs. Goss heard him come in and was greatly upset. No wonder when she had seen her uncle dying from the same thing. She set the kettle boiling to

sterilise instruments. Roy Goss was pale and complained of difficulty in focussing his eyes. This is one of the dangerous symptoms of snake-bite. I opened the wound further to promote more bleeding to wash out venom and changed the ligature for a more efficient rubber one. Then I injected two ampoules of tiger snake anti-venene. I made Goss sit quietly in front of the kitchen fire for the rest of the day and kept close watch on his condition.

His recovery was amazingly rapid. I had feared that I had insufficient serum to treat him, as I had been bitten by a tiger snake on the mainland only a little while before coming to the islands and had not had a chance to renew the serum I had used for my bite.

The next day Goss was again mutton-birding and taking it out on every snake he met!

One day Eric spotted a large snake slipping down a burrow. I poked down a wire hook and pulled out the infuriated snake, which hissed loudly and struggled violently.

Eric opened the hessian bag we carried and I dropped in the snake. I closed the bag and handed it back to Eric, who tied the top. He then picked up the bag below the string and suddenly dropped it.

"I've been bitten," he gasped.

I immediately pulled out my tourniquet and wound it around his arm above the elbow. The bite showed as a single fang mark between the index and second fingers of the left hand. Evidently only one fang had penetrated the bag.

I thought of the single ampoule of anti-venene left in my medical kit, hardly enough to treat any bite. Quickly I pulled the wrapping from a new razor blade and with one rapid slice took the whole bite area from between the fingers. Eric said he never felt it.

Back at camp I injected the remaining ampoule of anti-venene and waited results. All that night and next morning Eric was sick, his arm swelling and paining. He could not retain food for long.

By this time the straits' weather had improved, so Roy Goss launched his boat from its sheltering cove and Eric was taken to Flinders Island hospital, where he received additional treatment.

So much for our adventures on mutton bird island. Eric recovered from his snake-bite and we flew back to the Mainland with our catch of black tiger snakes. Mutton-birding still goes on every year and children get their month's holiday to go birding with their parents. If they do not go birding they still get their holidays, for what use is school with only a few pupils.

But if you are thinking of going to Flinders Island to dodge a month's schooling every year there's a catch, just as there is to everything that sounds so good. Christmas holidays only last a fortnight.