

*Nature at Work . . .*

"Spare me, Mr. Farmer! I'm your friend though you may not know it." (Lace monitor or common goanna).



## Stop . . . Spare that **GOANNA!**

*By Eric Worrell*

*The old rascal's really on your side, keeping nature in balance. And if he takes an odd egg — it's his fee for killing a thousand rats.*

**ALTHOUGH** most farmers have a friendly word for the goanna, there are still a few die-hards who, simply because they see no obvious use for an animal, use it for target practice. It seems a poor attitude that requires an economic use from our fauna before they can be offered protection.

The country man is in the best position to assess the value of wild life in his district and he can act in accordance with his observations. The city man comes to the country with a pea-rifle, and the mere fact that the animal is not protected by State legislation is sufficient to set him gunning.

The truth is that the goanna is economically valuable to the man on the land, and plays his part in preserving the ecological balance so essential to pastoral

and agricultural prosperity.

What is an ecological balance?

It is the balance achieved by the existence of various forms of life in relationship to each other. For example a tree is growing on a hill, it provides shade which attracts many birds whose constant droppings keep a binding growth of grass beneath the tree. Along comes man who decides that the tree is taking too much nourishment from the ground to allow the grass to grow freely.

The tree is ring-barked and dies. There is no more shade so birds go elsewhere. The roots no longer hold moisture under the ground so the grass dies in the first dry season. The natural surface binding has gone, so when the rains come the top-soil washes down the hill. In no time there is a nice case of

soil erosion.

In a similar way man upsets the balance of nature when he destroys animals and birds needlessly. Birds control hosts of rapidly breeding insects in the air and among the upper foliage. Their value as pest controllers on the ground is limited. This is the job left for reptiles.

Reptiles control rapidly multiplying pests on the ground, under the ground, and in thick undergrowth where birds cannot penetrate. For all you know, the pair of goannas living in a hollow tree by the feed shed could be all that stands between you and a first rate mouse plague. What rot you say. All right, get out your ready reckoner and work this out. One female mouse can produce an average litter of ten young every six weeks, that is less than one hundred per an-

num. But assuming that fifty per cent. of her progeny are females, which are old enough to breed at two months, then her multitudes of great-great-grandchildren are just about ready to produce their children by the end of the year. The staggering production from one mouse runs into thousands under the right conditions.

The goannas you tolerate near the feed shed are accounting for potential billions of rats and mice every year.

There are countless other ways in which the goanna proves his value to the man on the land. As a carrion feeder he is tops. A lone goanna cannot be expected to dispose of an entire dead bullock but every mouthful of carrion eaten by goannas reduces breeding areas for the blowflies that plague the sheep industry.

I have frequently seen goannas after floods feeding on the carcasses of drowned animals. In areas where myxomatosis has been introduced I have seen them cleaning up dead rabbits on the roadways. During grasshopper plagues I have seen them crunching grasshoppers until they were too full to move. Goannas have an enormous capacity for food as we have learned from the live specimens we keep for observation at Ocean Beach Aquarium, N.S.W.

Poultry farmers have less patience with goannas than most country men because of the great lizard's liking for eggs and young chickens. The answer is not to shoot the goanna.

Rats will cause more trouble on a poultry farm than goannas. Rats can break the poultry man. This is the goanna's job to control the rats. If you are careless with your poultry you must expect the goanna to help himself occasionally.

It is not difficult to protect your poultry from goannas.

Rabbit proof netting along the bottom of the runs will keep chicks in and goannas out. A strip of flat iron, preferably galvanized, about a foot deep, around the top of a fine wire will prevent goannas' claws getting a hold to climb into the runs. This is not an expensive job and will save many man hours of constant vigilance.

Australia is the home of goannas. We have about sixteen species. The perenty from central Australia is the biggest, attaining a length of eight feet. The common goanna or lace monitor grows to about seven feet. In Central Australia a pigmy species grows to only about a foot. Goannas have descended from one of the oldest living forms of reptiles, the Platyota.

So there you have him, the goanna. Protect your chickens and he'll give you valuable protection for your money. And apart from the economical advantages it's nice to have the old rascal around.