



The Cave Dwellers

► A POPULAR TV quiz program recently featured a genuine New England hermit as a contestant.

During the interview period he spoke about the pleasures of living alone: peace, quiet, no one to bother you, no need to talk. Yet the hermit seemed to have a good time talking to the TV audience about not talking.

Among the birds, the wrens have a reputation for hermit-like lives. In fact, the scientific name of the wren family is *Troglodytidae*, which means "cave dwellers." This comes from the habit of many wren species of building their elaborate nests in

hidden tangles and crevices and their love of secluded spots.

But like many TV hermits, many wrens like to make a public show of their propensity towards the solitary life. The loudest voice from the woods is often a scolding winter wren or the bright "tea-kettle" song of the Carolina wren.

Let a stranger come to the wren's private preserve and he will be driven away in quick order by the belligerent, noisy hermit.

In springtime, however, wrens drop their pretenses of liking life alone to begin the most un-hermit-like behavior of seeking mates. As if trying to show that he is a good provider, the male wren selects one or more likely nesting spots and begins construction of rather untidy nests in them.

When he finds a prospective mate, he ushers her to these vine-covered or rock-bound cottages for her inspection.

If the female decides to accept the male, her first act usually is to pull apart the flimsy home made by her mate and start anew in the building of an elaborate but cosy nest. Since she seems not to be impressed by his construction ability, the male now leaves the building up to her.

He devotes his time to singing and otherwise letting the woodland world know that no one had better trespass near his claim.

Work for the male begins again when the six to eight eggs hatch into six to eight baby wrens with an insatiable appetite.

Perhaps after all this work and worry of family duty the wrens are quite ready to live alone and like it when the brood is grown and gone. But, the old story, when spring comes around again, the magic of nature makes them forget the lesson of the last summer, and off they go in search of mates again.

Science News Letter, January 28, 1956

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ANIMAL NUTRITION

Predict Pellets For Cattle Feed

► CATTLE of the future may get an entire bale of hay in the form of a shovelful of pellets, H. D. Bruhn, professor of agricultural engineering at the University of Wisconsin, predicts.

Tests at the University, Prof. Bruhn says, show that most feeds can be pelleted. This is done by subjecting hay, corn or alfalfa to the pelleting machine's tremendous pressures. Pressures as high as 20,000 pounds per square inch have been used in one such machine. A practical pressure appears to be from 4,000 to 6,000 pounds per square inch.

Pelleted hay or grain, the Wisconsin scientist reports, can reduce labor, the need for maintaining high-quality feed, and cut the cost of storage space, feed-handling equipment and transportation.

Although the advantages of pelleted feed for the nation's cattle are many, Prof. Bruhn states, the time is still far off when the individual farmer will have a portable pelleting machine on his farm.

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PUBLIC HEALTH

Radiation From Medicine Might Require Safeguard

► RADIOACTIVITY from life-saving medical practices may prove to be more dangerous to the nation's genetic future than radioactivity from A- and H-bombs.

This was suggested by Stanley H. Clark, medical physicist at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital in Los Angeles, who estimates the average American is getting approximately ten times as much radiation each year from his doctor as from all nuclear explosions through 1954.

Mr. Clark points out that the average genetic exposure due to all medical radiation procedures, such as X-rays, fluoroscopes and radioactive medicines, is 0.1072 roentgen per person per year in the United States, or a total genetic dose of 17,200,000 roentgens annually for the United States population.

The genetic exposure in the U. S. due to gamma rays from radioactive fallout following all nuclear explosions through January, 1955, has been estimated, he reports, as about 0.01 roentgen per year.

In addition to these two sources of atomic radiation, Mr. Clark points out, natural sources, such as carbon-14 and potassium in the human body, cosmic rays and radioactivity of the earth's crust, give a range of from 0.143 to 0.147 roentgen per year.

These doses are very small and not enough to cause immediate damage to the individual, but their genetic effect might be dangerous.

Mr. Clark reports in the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* (Jan.) that radiation exposure from medical practices must be considered in any estimate of possible radiation danger to the population.

Concerning the use of radiation in medicine, "the estimated values may well make us pause and reconsider whether these exposure levels, which have come to be accepted as unavoidable in the name of progress, are to be continued or even increased," Mr. Clark cautions.

Science News Letter, January 28, 1956

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