Buffel grass - what it has done for Mundabullangana

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BUFFEL grass (Cenchrus ciliaris L.) was described by Mr. H. Suijdendorp in a recent issue of this Journal, but a good deal more can be said, mostly per the medium of illustrations, concerning the achievements already attained with this grass in reclaiming areas of eroded and part eroded country and returning it to profitable grazing.

Mundabullangana, or Munda, as it is commonly called for obvious reasons, is one of the best known and most efficiently-run properties in the predominantly spinifex region of our North-West.

Situated on the coast between Port Hedland and Roebourne, it covers three-quarters of a million acres. The 480,000 acres at present stocked, are subdivided into 53 paddocks with 80 watering points, and carry 30,000 sheep.

The manager for Mundabullangana Pastoral Company, Mr. R. Lukis, estimates that he has 60,000 acres of Buffel grass similar to that shown in illustration No. 1.

As asked recently for some figures which would illustrate the quality and carrying capacity of this pasture under fair seasonal conditions, Mr. Lukis wrote:

"In 1950 we paddocked 19,000 ewes for mating on 11,000 acres for five weeks. We then cut quite a few tons of meadow hay from that paddock and left 3,000 ewes in there for a further four months.

"Last year we ran 13,000 mated ewes on the same area for the same period. In both these instances we had good snap lambing results, and the paddock..."
in question remained green and in better heart than all the other paddocks, and for at least two months longer than other paddocks, as a result of the heavy feeding back.”

This, you will agree, sounds rather more like grazing procedure to be expected in agricultural areas than in a pastoral region with a haphazard rainfall averaging 13 inches a year.

Munda was first taken up about 1870 by Mr. A. R. Richardson, who moved on almost immediately farther up the coast to make his home at Pippingarra, leaving the McKay family to develop the former property.

About 1925, Munda was purchased by the Craig Bros., and it was under that ownership that most of the present Buffel grass areas became established.

Buffel grass was identified in our North-West as far back as 1910 and appears to have arrived by accident, probably in fodder brought from South Africa for the early camel teams. Its value was recognised by pastoralists, and active steps have been taken by a number of stations to collect seed and assist the spread to new areas.

Large stretches of coastal country which carried weeping grass, bundle-bundle, button grass, chintiby and pigweed—all considered good feed in the early years—were bare and actively eroding when the Craig Bros. commenced their programme of Buffel distribution. Various methods were used to broadcast the seed, and it is understood that in 1927 and 1928 pilots of Western Australia Airways Ltd., assisted with some aerial sowings.

Most of the areas which were a worry at that time are now carrying a splendid stand of Buffel grass, varying of course with the seasons, but rating always among the highest carrying capacities for the district.

Mr. Lukis is still worried about areas of “scalded” country which appear to be spreading, but these are now in spinifex country which does not take Buffel grass so readily as the original native grass areas. He is pursuing an active programme, however, and with effective co-operation from Agricultural Adviser H. Suijdendorp, he is finding that with assistance in the way of cultivation to provide cover for seed and to check surface run-off of rains, Buffel grass will spread through a lot of country in which it did not become established after early broadcasting methods.
Figs. 3 and 4.—Two photographs of the same patch of country. The top picture shows portion of a paddock at Munda Station after heavy grazing in a dry summer. The lower picture shows it after the grass had responded to early winter rains. The irregular ground surface in the background is the result of wind erosion prior to the introduction of Buffel grass.
Illustrations show the type of country now being reclaimed by Buffel grass and something of the methods employed to get it established.

Agricultural Adviser Suijdendorp is equipped with a Ferguson tractor and its various attachments. He has tried furrow-

Fig. 5.—Buffel grass has established itself on the "pedestals" but has been unable to gain a footing on the bare, eroded surface of the claypan

Fig. 6 and 7.—Where contour working was carried out, the Buffel grass established itself on the barest, hard, claypan surface

Fig. 8.—Buffel grass seed was broadcast over the whole foreground but established itself only on the cultivated strip

Fig. 9.—Ten-weeks-old Buffel grass plants in test rows at Woodstock Station, 100 miles inland

Although it seems impractical to suggest using a tractor and cultivating implements on million-acre pastoral leases of low carrying capacity per acre, when one considers that Munda paddocks at present enclose something like 20,000 acres of bare claypan, and that Buffel grass on the same station in adjacent paddocks, is providing meadow hay after having carried 19,000 ewes on 11,000 acres for five weeks, the effort begins to look worthwhile.

Fig. 8.—Buffel grass has established itself on the "pedestals" but has been unable to gain a footing on the bare, eroded surface of the claypan.

Fig. 9.—Buffel grass seed was broadcast over the whole foreground but established itself only on the cultivated strip.

Fig. 10.—Where contour working was carried out, the Buffel grass established itself on the barest, hard, claypan surface.

Fig. 11.—Ten-weeks-old Buffel grass plants in test rows at Woodstock Station, 100 miles inland.
In addition, it must be remembered that the 20,000 acres of claypan is actively spreading. If unchecked there is no limit to its ultimate extent. If sown to Buffel grass and properly managed, it can have a steady carrying capacity year after year.

We know of one claypan on another station in the Port Hedland area, which covers 25 square miles of country which originally carried good, edible, soft spinifex. The present pan surface is 5ft. below the earlier spinifex level. This will be the fate of the many small bare areas which are to be found throughout the Hedland region if corrective measures are not taken to prevent them linking up into progressively larger expanses.

Buffel, and its near relative, Birdwood grass, should be sown at a rate equal to about 3 lb. per acre, but it is important that the seed should be mature. It remains dormant for some time after harvesting, and germination figures as low as 2% have been obtained with tests of new season's seed. If stored for a year or so a 70% germination can be expected.

The seed will naturally blow from denuded surfaces, and establishment can be expected only where it has a change to lodge in some protected crevice in a broken surface or among plant debris.

Cultivation with any implement, prior to broadcasting the seed assists in establishment and, if the seed is sown in this way in strips throughout the region to be grassed, it will gradually spread itself over the intervening spaces.

Buffel grass is doing a wonderful job for Munda., and station managers in the vicinity would do well to acquaint themselves with the trials in which Mr. Lukis and Mr. Suijdendorp are co-operating, in their efforts to induce the grass to spread to other areas.
Mr. J. W. Wall, Stony Creek, Narrabri, N.S.W., and his son John.

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