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C Marshall

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Rabbit Control

By C. MARSHALL, Field Superintendent, Agriculture Protection Board

IN the year 1859, an enthusiastic sportsman in Victoria took delivery from the clipper "Lightning" of a small consignment of wild European rabbits which he joyfully released on his estate at Barwon Park, near Geelong, in order to assure himself of some rough shooting. He was not the only rabbit importer on record—tame rabbits were brought into Australia before and after 1895 and doubtless there were other importations of the wild rabbit—but he is generally credited—or discredited—with having triggered off the rabbit plague.

This year, therefore, Australia commences her second century, A.R. (After Rabbits) and 1960 promises to be a particularly important year in rabbit control history.

At present, rabbit numbers are at or near an all-time low, thanks to the unprecedented deadliness of the myxomatosis virus and the improved techniques and widespread application of our modern rabbit control methods. Any idea that the rabbit is a spent force, however—that it can no longer be regarded as a menace to Australian agriculture—must be combated by every means in our power.

The rabbit is a singularly defenceless animal, quite unfitted—except in one respect—for the grim battle of survival in a world intent upon its eradication. That one exception—its power to reproduce itself in vast numbers—has enabled it to withstand successfully the heavy mortalities wrought by droughts, floods, fires, diseases, the attacks of its natural enemies and all the death-dealing techniques evolved by man.

Rabbit populations in Australia are, generally speaking, at a low ebb, but it has also become quite obvious to those people who are interested in the control of rabbits and have studied them in their natural surroundings, that any serious reduction in population numbers has the effect of stimulating breeding. This breeding may commence immediately following the cause of the reduction, or could be delayed temporarily until the reason for the upset has been forgotten, giving the remaining rabbits time and an opportunity to settle down and re-establish themselves. However, we can be certain that this upsurge in breeding will come if the pests are allowed to remain undisturbed.

This intensive breeding makes it important that all cover, warren, etc., should be destroyed, regardless of the apparent absence of rabbits following other successful control work.

A DIFFICULT YEAR

The 1959 season was a difficult year for most farmers. The unpredictable weather made conditions most trying. For rabbits, the season was in the main favourable. Fairly dry conditions throughout the wet South-West favoured continuous breeding. Losses of kitten rabbits from the flooding of warrens was low, and the general survival rate high, by comparison with the average year.

Strangely enough, the highest increase was noted in the North-Eastern districts. Normally, these areas do not favour heavy breeding during a dry season. Apparently, the present build-up is an example of the
rabbit's determination to re-establish strong colonies throughout these areas.

Control work undertaken during 1959 was not quite up to standard of the previous season and this factor, plus the decline in the myxomatosis virus killing power, was responsible for a noticeable increase in the number of rabbits which were alive at the beginning of 1960.

The decline in control work during 1959 was due to several reasons; a major one being the reluctance of some farmers to destroy warrens and cover, because these warrens shelter the mosquito that spreads the myxomatosis virus.

These farmers completely ignore the most obvious fact—that if they had no warrens, they would have no rabbits, and naturally, no need for the virus-carrying mosquito. They should also remember that warrens remain an open invitation for all stray rabbits to take up residence and, in addition, provide a protection against their natural enemies.

A second, serious impediment to vermin control, is that a certain section of the farmers value the rabbit commercially. They can now dispose of the rabbit carcass for local consumption at the attractive prices of 5s. to 7s. a pair. This has encouraged what we call "rabbit farming." Commercial trapping can only have one result—to increase the breeding rate and spread the rabbits to adjoining properties.

We will endeavour to stamp out this evil during the 1960 season. However, it is very difficult to obtain results if a section of the farmers refuse to co-operate.

**FUTURE PLANS**

The Protection Board's plans for 1960 include continuation of warren destruction work and organised poison drives. Gazetted drives will be conducted throughout all vermin districts during the months of January, February, March and April. Once again, "1080" and oats will be the principal bait but we would recommend that cut apple be used when available. A few pounds of apple bait added to the oat bait could prove most helpful in destroying any foxes that follow rabbit trails. The Department's "1080" units will be available to farmers who wish to take advantage of this service. However, I would like to make it quite clear that it is not compulsory for any farmer to employ our "1080" unit. He may do his own work if he so desires, always providing that he obtains results, and works within the drive dates, using the poison specified, and complying with the gazetted notice.

The Department's warren-ripping units will be working in the Mt. Barker, Cranbrook, Katanning and adjoining districts early in the year and will remain in those areas while work is available. Every farmer who has difficult warrens on his property should take advantage of this plant, while available; it may be years before they return to your district.

The Group Inspectorial Scheme extended rapidly during the past 12 months and the position today is most gratifying. We believe that 98 per cent. of the Boards who have co-operated with the Agriculture Protection Board in the formation and management of these groups are satisfied with the results obtained from our combined efforts and give full support to the objective of this scheme, which is the coordination of vermin control throughout our State.

**SOME SOUND ADVICE**

The following are a few points on rabbit control that are well worth repeating.

When planning your future rabbit control work do not depend on myxomatosis virus to produce a miracle. Do not rely entirely on one type of control. Use all methods available. Do not operate as an individual; insist on the "all-in" drive system for your district and work in conjunction with your neighbours.

Before commencing your work make sure that you know where the rabbits are living and feeding and lay your trails accordingly. Do not stint the length of trail or miss small colonies. These are important. Take a pride in your free feeding and feed according to the requirements of the rabbits visiting your trails. Use only the best materials at all times and make sure everything is fresh and clean. Always err on the generous side when laying poison bait. Make sure there is enough for all rabbits. Destroy all cover, warrens, logs, bracken, etc. Remember the golden rule for rabbit control—no cover, no rabbits.
A MENACE—NOT JUST A NUISANCE

I believe that the average farmer is prone to forget past damage by rabbits to pastures and crops, and, unfortunately, is inclined to regard the present scattered population more as a nuisance than as a menace. We also have quite a number of younger farmers who have not experienced heavy rabbit invasion, and we sincerely hope they may never have to in the future. However, we are concerned that such an increase is a distinct possibility if the present trend of indifference is allowed to continue. The A.P.B. policy for 1960 will be more towards eradication than it has been in the past, always assuming that eradication is practical.

Most of our wheatbelt country could be freed of rabbits if proper attention was given to the destruction of cover. The same would apply to most of our Great Southern and Central districts. It is becoming clearer each season that the controlling of rabbits by poison bait is limited. To consolidate our gains we must destroy all cover.

In conclusion, I would like to thank the many farmers who have supported the Agriculture Protection Board's efforts during the past year and to remind all landholders that our success depends on your co-operation.

Gullying Wastes Good Land

There are areas of severe erosion in our farming areas. You may be worried by some on your own property. Less serious damage, which can get worse, is more in need of urgent attention and is easier to fix. Here is a horrible example of what erosion can do to good farm land.
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