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THE RABBIT POPULATION IN W.A.

By A. R. TOMLINSON, Chief Vermin Control Officer

So much misunderstanding and confusion regarding the rabbit position in Western Australia appears to have arisen that possibly a brief explanation may be of help. Most of the difficulties seem to come from misunderstanding and misquoting of reports made by my officers and myself. For instance, I am supposed to have said that rabbits had increased ten times throughout Western Australia and also that they are present in plague form. Such allegations are obviously absurd, particularly as so much care has been taken to keep reports factual.

Probably it will be helpful if I explain some important points regarding rabbit populations, their breeding and rate of increase. For some years prior to 1955, W.A. had a rabbit population at almost saturation point. They bred up during winter and spring, but by the end of summer, natural factors such as water and feed shortages, animal and bird enemies, diseases, etc., had normally reduced them considerably. A further reduction resulted from destruction measures by man.

Winter Increases

However, about a month after the first winter rains, most of the does would have litters averaging five young and this could be repeated at monthly intervals until the finish of green feed in late spring. By this time young does from the first litters would also be breeding. The natural death rate is high, but the population would be restored within a season, and could be increased many times quite easily under favourable conditions. (A 90 per cent.
mortality is necessary to offset this high
breeding rate.)

Secondly I might explain that satisfac­
torily describing wild animal populations
is something which has always baffled
those concerned. For instance how can
we express numbers of rabbits in com­
parative terms, when local conditions
differ so greatly. A “large number” of
rabbits in eastern districts of this State
would be considered a small number in
the western areas. As a result we are
forced to make any references to popula­
tions relate to each particular area, which
can make any general statements rather
sweeping. A doubling of population could
mean increasing from two to four in some
places, and 200 to 400 in others. Furthe­
more, with different production capacities
in our agricultural areas, a few rabbits in
one place could cause as serious a loss as
a large number elsewhere. At any rate,
the most satisfactory way we have of
expressing population trends is using such
terms as “doubling” or “halving” or by
percentages. Any other method is mean­
ingless or confusing.

BIG REDUCTIONS

As everyone knows, myxomatosis caused
the first really significant artificial fall in
rabbits here. The big general drop was in
1955, and 1956 (with the Northern agri­
cultural areas earlier) and the “1080”
poisoning drives have assisted greatly
especially where myxomatosis was less
effective.

The population reduction was very
heavy, and many farmers will agree was
probably 90 per cent. to 95 per cent. of the
rabbits. On most properties rabbit num­
bers are so low compared with what they
were before that to the owners they might
appear insignificant. Even under normal
circumstances, less than half the popula­
tion can be seen, but now all the survivors
are very shy and are rarely seen in day­
light. Scratches in the ground are often
the only indication of their presence.

However it is essential to change our
assessment of the situation from the
former plague numbers to the present low
levels and to change the approach to
destruction work from control to preven­
tion of a build-up. It is on these present
low levels that I am basing all my cal­
culations of population changes and urg­
ing extensive preventive action.

The breeding pattern I mentioned
earlier in conjunction with the knowledge
that the myxomatosis mortality rate is now
ranging from 90 per cent. to as low as 40
per cent., gives a key to the real position
to-day. The few rabbits which were left
are breeding just as busily (five distinct
successive batches of young kittens were
observed in one region last year), but to
the natural hazards are added the declin­
ing myxomatosis and the organised “1080”
poisoning drives which together are still
exercising a fairly high controlling effect.

By early summer, the rabbits left over
after the previous season have increased
to their maximum, but by the end of
summer they will have been reduced again
to their minimum level for the year. My
field officers and myself are attempting
to assess the population trends, particu­
larly at these maximum and minimum
points while allowing for normal fluctua­
tions.

INCREASE RECORDED

There can be no doubt there has been
a general increase. I make haste to add
that it has varied from region to region,
and often from property to property, but
the overall population is still not as low
as it was two years ago.

The rise may appear insignificant in
some areas (only four rabbits where there
were two), but our earlier history shows
that an increase anywhere is a threat to
all the agricultural areas. Probably even
with comparatively limited control work,
the return of rabbits to their previous
plague numbers could still take several
years, but it would come.

The present public attitude has ap­
parently been little different from what it
was when rabbits were first commencing
to spread in W.A. many years ago. No
doubt depending largely on the private
opinions of each individual, as well as the
extent of rabbit penetration onto his
property, in those days some were concerned while others were not worried. Some said it could not happen here and opposed active control or prevention measures. Surely what happened then should be a lesson to us all now, that it can and will happen again if we allow ourselves to be lulled into an acceptance that rabbits are finished for all time. The greatest emphasis should no longer be on control but prevention.

Observations made by the Chairman of the Road Board Association to the December, 1958, meeting of the Agriculture Protection Board indicate an encouraging awareness of the position among some leading representatives of farmers and local authorities. He stated that reports had just been made to the executive of his Association of a general increase in rabbits extending over most of the infested areas. These reports coincide with the seasonal maximum population, but their significance lies in the fact that the annual build-up has now become sufficiently noticeable for comment.
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