1959

The donkeys are doomed

P. J. McDonald

Follow this and additional works at: https://researchlibrary.agric.wa.gov.au/journal_agriculture3

Recommended Citation
McDonald, P. J. (1959) "The donkeys are doomed," Journal of the Department of Agriculture, Western Australia, Series 3: Vol. 8 : No. 2 , Article 8.
Available at: https://researchlibrary.agric.wa.gov.au/journal_agriculture3/vol8/iss2/8

This article is brought to you for free and open access by Research Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in Journal of the Department of Agriculture, Western Australia, Series 3 by an authorized administrator of Research Library. For more information, please contact jennifer.heathcote@agric.wa.gov.au, sandra.papenfus@agric.wa.gov.au, paul.orange@dpird.wa.gov.au.
THE DONKEYS ARE DOOMED

By P. J. McDONALD, Regional Vermin Control Officer (Kimberleys)

FROM the turn of the century until about 25 years ago, the patient, hardy donkey played an important role in the pastoral industry of the North-West and Kimberleys. Donkey and camel teams plodded inland from the ports, hauling waggons loaded with food, drink, clothing, tools, fencing wire, building materials, medicines, furniture and all the other items needed on the stations and in the widely-scattered townships. Later, the waggons were hauled back to the ports loaded high with wool, hides and sandalwood.

Waggons drawn by up to 80 donkeys were a common sight on outback trails, the huge vehicles and their loads towering high above a forest of waving ears and a thicket of shaggy legs.

The “donkey mail” provided an infrequent link with the outside world for many isolated sheep and cattle stations, and most pastoral holdings maintained large numbers of donkeys for pack and draught work in their mustering and droving plants.

“PENSIONERS” PROTECTED

On some properties up to 100 donkey mares were kept as “breeders” to provide replacements for the teams. Animals which had given good service were turned out and allowed to roam the country as “pensioners”—and woe betide any “trigger-happy” station hand or traveller found taking potshots at them.

As better roads came into being, the faster-moving motor-trucks gradually ousted the donkeys and camels from the transport business and by the 1930’s there were few large teams in operation, which meant that an increasing number of donkeys were freed to run wild.

Better equipped for “living off the country” than other introduced animals, the donkeys multiplied rapidly, roaming the country in large herds which levied heavy toll on the choicest herbage and over-ran the rich river flats and frontage country.

A PEST TAKES OVER

A series of good seasons blanketed the depredations of the donkey herds for some
years and possibly the first indication that they had increased to pest proportions was in 1936 when Mr. Joe Egan of Ord River Station found it necessary to destroy a large number in his bullock paddock. Here they had increased to such an extent that the cattle were short of feed.

World War II disrupted normal station management work for some years owing to lack of labour and materials, and when re-organisation was put in hand following the cessation of hostilities, the donkey herds had become a serious problem throughout large areas of the North-West and Kimberleys.

With a vast amount of leeway to be made up in rebuilding yards and watering-points after the wartime lack of maintenance, there was insufficient money and labour available on most properties to wage successful warfare against pests and it was not until 1955-56 that the West Kimberley Road Board were successful in having the donkeys gazetted as vermin. They were closely followed by the Halls Creek and Wyndham Road Boards.

**WAR ON VERMIN**

Once the donkeys were officially proscribed under the Vermin Act, Officers of the Agriculture Protection Board got busy on surveys of the donkey populations, advised station managers where concentrations existed, and offered assistance, where required, in the organisation of destruction methods.

The best results to date have been achieved by teams of donkey-shooters using high-velocity rifles operating at or near water-holes or using four-wheel-drive vehicles to follow the herds.

The latter method can only be used on stations with large areas of open country such as on properties east of the Ord River, in the Derby-Fitzroy area and to the north and south of the Leopold Ranges. Shooting teams employed by two groups of stations in the East Kimberley area have destroyed over 20,000 donkeys during the past three years at a cost of 4s. 6d. a head.

Attempts to offset these costs by the sale of the hides yielded an average return of 9s. per hide after paying expenses, but the skinning slowed down the destruction rate from about 200 to 30 a day and defeated the main object of the campaign.

In the Range country, where wheeled vehicles cannot be used, the shooters work with pack outfits. Spotlights shooting is only successful on very dark nights.

Ex-Army 0.303 rifles with full-length wood stocks are generally used. Sporting rifles are not suitable as they become too hot to hold after about 20 shots have been fired.

Where planned drives have been put into operation, the donkey numbers have been drastically reduced but influxes of the pests still take place from other areas.
As the campaign intensifies, it is expected that donkeys will cease to be a major pest in the pastoral areas.

WILD CAMELS

Although they have not increased in numbers to the same extent as the donkeys, wild camels—descendants of animals which have escaped or been released from camel teams—have become a nuisance in some areas.

They can cause considerable damage to fences, and reports have been received of bull camels savaging sheep congregated at watering-points. Numbers have been shot by pastoralists and Vermin Control Officers and in this case one pest has aided in the destruction of others, as the crisp white fat of the camel's hump is excellent material for poisoning wild dogs and foxes.

Cut into cubes into which strychnine pellets are inserted, the fat is readily eaten by dingoes and foxes, and has an advantage over many other baiting materials, in that it may be stored for long periods without deterioration.

W.A. SHEARING BOOKLET SETS A STANDARD

An illustrated article "Sheep Shearing Technique" which appeared in the West Australian "Journal of Agriculture" is shortly to be translated into Afrikaans and widely distributed throughout South Africa by a firm specialising in shearing machinery.

This was announced recently by the Minister for Agriculture (Mr. L. F. Kelly), who said that Western Australia had given a lead to the Commonwealth eight years ago when Messrs. W. L. McGarry and D. A. Young, with the assistance of the Government photographer, had prepared a "blow by blow" instructional pamphlet designed to improve the standards of shearing tradesmanship.

The booklet was revised as Bulletin No. 2409 in 1957, by the original authors and Mr. M. Butler, also of the Sheep and Wool Branch, and its popularity has been fully maintained.

Mr. Kelly said that requests for permission to reprint "Sheep Shearing Technique" with suitable acknowledgments had been received from New Zealand, Argentina and South Africa. Many thousands of copies had been distributed throughout Australia by commercial firms and it had been used as a standard text book in many agricultural colleges and technical schools.

The blocks of the illustrations had been loaned to the New South Wales Department of Agriculture for the preparation of a similar booklet, and many reports had been received of farmers' sons who became expert shearers by following the illustrations step by step to their conclusion.

It was particularly gratifying, said the Minister, to find that West Australian enterprise was so widely appreciated and he complimented those responsible for the publication on an effort which had greatly enhanced the prestige of this State in the important sphere of wool production.
Flowers

TO SPEED THE PARTING FRIEND
TO BRING COMFORT TO THE SICK
TO CONVEY YOUR SYMPATHY,
TO THOSE WHO ARE IN GRIEF
TO GRACE YOUR WEDDING DAY
MAY BE HAD BY JUST CALLING 23 3048 (3 LINES)
OR TELEGRAPH
WILSONJOHN PERTH
PROMPT ATTENTION TO YOUR
WISHES
BEAUTIFUL FLOWERS
EXPERT FLORAL ARTISTS
WE WILL RAIL OR AIRFREIGHT
FLOWERS ANYWHERE

74 BARRACK ST., PERTH
PHONE 23 3048
TELEGRAPHIC ADDRESS: WILSONJOHN PERTH

ASK YOUR STOREKEEPER
To
SEND YOUR PARCELS BY RAIL

Have them sent by...

• THE INSURED PARCELS SYSTEM
  Free insurance for parcels valued up to £10.
  3d. insurance for every additional £10 or part thereof.

• THE CASH ON DELIVERY SYSTEM
  No money to send—you just pay your Station
  Master when you collect your parcel.

• THE PERISHABLE PARCEL SERVICE
  Fast transits at half parcels rates for perishable
  parcels.

REMEMBER! THE RAILWAY IS THE SAFE
WAY FOR ALL YOUR PARCELS

Western Australian Government Railways