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CURRENT COMMENTS ON VERMIN CONTROL

By A. R. TOMLINSON, Chief Vermin Control Officer.

There have been many reports of outbreaks of myxomatosis this season. Some of them have been of a high killing intensity and farmers have been led to hope that the disease has returned to wipe out the rabbit population altogether. The truth of the matter is that myxomatosis is now so well spread over the country that probably every rabbit here will be affected by the virus at some stage of its existence. This applies to the rest of the Australian mainland and, in every case where blood samples have been taken from rabbits, signs of the disease have been found.

Myxomatosis is now well established in Australia's rabbit population and will doubtless remain permanently. The effect will gradually decline until eventually a balance will be reached as it has in South America where the virus is always present among the rabbits but will not kill them.

Until this happens, seasonal conditions will have a big influence on how active the disease will be. This season, for instance, has probably been almost ideal for myxomatosis transmission which has accounted for the widespread flare-ups. The pattern which may be expected will be the continuing decline in the effectiveness of myxomatosis with intermittent upsurges in favourable seasons. The total effect of these flare-ups will of course be declining also. Myxomatosis is still helping to keep rabbits down but, even under this season's ideal conditions, is clearly not as effective as it was earlier.

The rabbit situation, as usual at this time of the year, is rather confused but one thing is certain—there has been no noticeable overall reduction. In most places of course local populations have been greatly reduced from the normal early summer
Another unfortunate tendency is to regard participation in a poisoning drive as the total effort for the year. This is quite wrong, as in many instances, further poisoning, warren destruction or fumigation are required also.

FOX-POISONING

The poisoning drives against foxes have been enthusiastically welcomed by the farmers involved. It has been made clear that the district-wide drives are mainly aimed at giving the fox population a severe setback before lambing. Continued year-round activity by farmers would of course assist in more permanent control, but most farmers are content with a drive to protect their lambs.

Our experience has been that, in the first drives, many farmers are rather dubious about poison baiting but, after the initial experience, the majority become quite enthusiastic. Probably the main factors leading to this change are the advice on poisoning methods given by the vermin control officers, the availability of ready-made baits at road boards, the noticeable drop in foxes and the poisoning of reserves and Crown lands by Agriculture Protection Board units. These units will continue with poisoning operations throughout the year.

WILD DOGS

The State-wide wild dog situation continues at the all-time low reached over the last few years. There can be little doubt that in most areas this has been due to the carefully directed and co-ordinated activities against them by pastoralists and A.P.B. officers.

The destruction drives conducted by pastoralists, vermin boards and road boards in the North-West, are achieving good results and the longer they are continued the more successful they are becoming with the gain in experience and knowledge of the country.

In the Kimberleys from where most of W.A.'s wild dog scalps normally come it is noticeable that numbers have fallen even in the more remote areas.

This is a most interesting trend, and appears to have extended right across northern Australia. Queensland’s scalps reached a peak in 1952, and then fell

Fig. 2.—The notice on the tree reads “Poisoned Baits Laid Here,” but the dingo couldn’t read
steadily to a very low figure in 1956. Our scalps reached the lowest figure on record in 1957, and have continued at a low level. The fluctuations are possibly part of a population cycle or have resulted from seasonal conditions. I hope the fact that last year Queensland's scalps jumped suddenly to an all-time record will not have any relationship to the position in W.A. Queensland paid for 47,000 wild dog scalps and the overall bonus payments for all vermin including foxes, wild pigs, etc., was the record sum of over £70,000. The increase was attributed to prolonged drought conditions inland driving the dogs into settlement.

One interesting point about Western Australia’s scalp figures is that while the majority of wild dog scalps are produced in pastoral areas, the fluctuations in their numbers have followed the fox figures very closely although by far the majority of fox scalps come from agricultural areas. There does not appear to be any significant relationship between seasonal conditions in pastoral and agricultural areas.

**WILD DONKEYS**

Wild donkeys have been coming into greater prominence over recent years. They have been in pest proportions in the Eastern Goldfields, the North Eastern pastoral districts and the North-West. However, it is in the Kimberleys where they have become the greatest menace. On many stations it is claimed that there are more donkeys than cattle. An estimate has been made that each donkey eats twice as much feed as one head of cattle, so the seriousness of the situation is apparent. It becomes even more acute under extremely dry conditions as the donkeys will beat the cattle to available water.

Water poisoning cannot be used extensively under Kimberley conditions and shooting is the only control measure at all effective. As the danger has become apparent, more and more stations have been active against wild donkeys. Unfortunately, with a pest so mobile, activity by stations individually has little effect and co-ordinated overall drives are the
only possible solution. The Agriculture Protection Board is assisting in the organisation of drives in the Eastern Kimberleys and at the eastern end of the West Kimberley area. The stations and road boards will be conducting the main organisation themselves with the guidance and advice of Agriculture Protection Board officers. The Protection Board will also help with men and ammunition. It is hoped that when the results obtained by co-operative efforts are seen, this type of control drive will be just as enthusiastically carried out annually as it is against other vermin in other parts of the State.

KANGAROOS

Kangaroos continue to cause concern, and reports of their depredations are being received from various parts of the State. In the West Kimberleys where wallabies concentrate in big numbers along the Fitzroy River, some of the stations took advantage of the dry conditions last year to conduct poisoning campaigns. Investigations by Protection Board officers had shown that baiting was possible but only in drought seasons and the success obtained certainly confirmed this finding.

The two-year open season for grey kangaroos in the lower southern agricultural districts will close soon and consideration will no doubt be given to an extension of a further year. It is interesting to note what has happened so far during the open season. From reports being received from some districts kangaroos are still doing just as much damage as before. In others, particularly where organised shooting has been conducted, there has been considerable improvement.

Western Australia with its area of a million square miles has many and varied vermin problems. With so much unsettled and remote land including ideal breeding and living places there is a continuous reservoir of pests ready to move in. The only reasonable approach to control under these circumstances is to use all the available resources including farmers, pastoralists, local authorities and the Agriculture Protection Board in carefully-planned positive co-operative and co-ordinated efforts, and this is the policy the Protection Board is endeavouring to apply.

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