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Attack the rabbit at home: destroy warrens and harbourage

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Effective rabbit destruction often calls for a carefully worked out control programme consisting of poisoning, fumigating and warren and harbourage destruction. Possibly the most effective means of not only controlling rabbits but ultimately eradicating them from holdings is the destruction of warrens and harbourage.

By J. S. CRAWFORD, Assistant Chief Vermin Control Officer

FOR their survival there is one thing rabbits must have, and that is harbourage. Their main harbourage is provided by warrens, fallen hollow logs, dense scrub, bracken and rocky hills, all of which provide excellent cover for rabbits.

As the basic requirements for survival of rabbits is harbourage, its destruction is obviously of paramount importance in eradicating the pest from holdings. This is particularly true in wheatbelt areas.

Destruction of Warrens

The ripping up of rabbit warrens has proved to be one of the most effective rabbit control techniques yet applied in this State. Apart from the many rabbits destroyed in warrens during ripping operations, the destruction of their harbourage leaves the surviving rabbits easy prey to foxes and other natural enemies, beside depriving them of snug breeding quarters.

Different types of farm implements have been used as rippers for destroying warrens, with varying success. However, the most efficient type of ripper is one that has one, two, or three prongs, according to the horse power of the tractor, and having a penetration of about two feet or more below the surface of the ground.

The rear mounted (mostly single tyne) rippers have proved satisfactory, principally on open country, but where the ripper is mounted on the front of the tractor, usually on the “A” frame of a dozer, and in the place of the blade, it gives excellent results as the prongs can destroy warrens situated near rocks, in fallen timber, close to fences and in similar awkward spots.

Thoroughness in carrying out rabbit eradication work is the key to success, and this applies most emphatically in the destruction of warrens. Warrens can be completely destroyed by deep ripping, and this can be best accomplished by cross-ripping, that is, ripping first in one direction and then again at right angles to the first runs. The initial ripping loosens up the ground, allowing the prongs of the ripper, when cross-ripping, to penetrate much deeper below the surface. The high degree of total destruction of warrens obtained by this method amply justifies the extra time and labour put into the job.

It is most important that the ripping of warrens be commenced outside the range of the entrances actually seen. By ripping “wide” practically all lower channels of the warrens (which often extend out beyond the visible entrances) are destroyed.

Warrens can be successfully ripped during most of the year. However, in carrying out the ripping of warrens during the dry
months of the year, the dry ground disturbed with the ripper prong tends to become pulverised so that the earth percolates down the passages, well below the depth reached by the prong.

To ensure that the treated warrens are totally destroyed for all time, it is strongly recommended that the following suggestions be carried out:—

- As soon as possible after the completion of ripping, smooth over the tops of the warrens using a scarifier, disc plough, or similar implement. This is most important as the farm implement further pulverises the surface earth and also removes deep furrows or large clods of soil, which would provide cover for outside rabbits attempting to re-open the warrens.

- For a period following ripping, the warrens should be inspected a few times. Any odd entrances found re-opened should be fumigated (chloropicrin or phostoxin are recommended for this purpose) and well broken back.

- If warrens were on cleared land the smoothed off soil should be re-seeded with pasture, with a liberal application of superphosphate. The following year, all traces of the warrens should have disappeared.

Natural Harbourage

It is most important to clean up fallen timber, particularly hollow logs, which afford excellent coverage for rabbits. Areas of standing timber retained for shade purposes for stock, should have any scrub and undergrowth removed.

Any warrens exposed following the removal of cover should be ripped if practical, or otherwise fumigated.

Scrub along fence lines, if not essential to prevent wind erosion, should be removed, and any warrens encountered ripped out. Where wind-breaks must be left in the form of strips of scrub along fence lines the scrub should be thinned out if infested with rabbits and the warrens dealt with thoroughly by one or other of the methods previously outlined. If it is imperative that the scrub be left untouched because of its wind-break value, it should be well poisoned whenever the rabbits manifest themselves.

Where steep rocky outcrops are encountered and it is practically impossible to lay poison with a vehicle or reasonably by hand, some land-holders have solved the problem by rabbit-netting off such areas. The rabbits then die out from starvation or lack of water; if some survive, they remain contained within the area.

This brings up the matter of big heaps of mallee roots and stones left in some paddocks, and becoming undermined with warrens. These and any other heaps of roots, or stones that it is intended to leave for any length of time should be surrounded with rabbit netting to contain any existing rabbits, or prevent the vermin from penetrating the heaps. Poisoned grain dropped inside the netting surrounding rabbit infested stone or root heaps should clean up the pest.

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