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Rabbits in the Karri country - Some Recollections of 30 years of Vermin Control in the Lower J South-West

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RABBITS *in the* KARRI COUNTRY

Some Recollections of 30 years of Vermin Control in the Lower South-West

Compiled by C. D. GOODING from Information supplied by W. J. ROONEY

RABBITS first made their appearance in various parts of the Manjimup Road Board District during 1925 and 1926. By 1928, the early arrivals appeared to have consolidated their position and increased rapidly. The areas where rabbits first appeared in serious numbers were Group 119 in the Quinninup area, Groups 123 and 117 at Northcliffe, and Groups 65 and 26 in the Eastbrook, Pemberton and Channeberrup areas. Middlesex and West Manjimup districts were also becoming infested.

Foreword by A. R. TOMLINSON, Chief Vermin Control Officer

"Bill" Rooney has become almost a legendary figure in the sphere of rabbit control in the lower South-West. He has worked very closely with the Government vermin control officers and has been regarded almost as one of them.

He has spent many years of his life in helping farmers in the Manjimup district to protect their properties from the ravages of the rabbit, and has always been a keen advocate of the use of teams of men, with the necessary equipment, to assist in control measures.

It was at Mr. Rooney's request for a solution of the rabbit problem in the Manjimup area that the Agriculture Protection Board carried out its initial work in connection with poisoning teams. Mr. Rooney must feel considerable satisfaction at the success of our Rabbit Control Scheme (using the poison 1080) as going a long way towards the practical application of his theories.

No real efforts were made to eradicate, or even control, rabbits at this period. Rabbits had not formed warrens and the young were mainly born in short, single-entrance tunnels which were carefully concealed and covered over with fresh earth. This was usually referred to as "stop" breeding.

At this stage, foxes had not been seen in the districts but they began to make their appearance early in the 1930's and reaped an easy harvest of young rabbits from the blind breeding burrows.

Probably because of the presence of foxes, rabbits commenced to dig in and constructed deep warrens so that it soon became a rare occurrence to find a shallow breeding tunnel.

In the 1930's, when the depression hit the districts very hard, farming was in the doldrums. Butterfat (first-grade) brought 8d. lb. and the lower grades were almost unsaleable.

Group settlers were thrown on their own resources and being unable to feed themselves, and their families, and at the same time meet their commitments, they began to vacate their properties leaving many areas of pasture unoccupied as a free gift to the rabbits.

Under these conditions, the rabbit hordes increased alarmingly. Of this period Mr. Rooney says, "We began to get alarmed at the menace on our own property. I wrote to the Department of Agriculture several times explaining the situation, and to emphasise my argument I poisoned a nearby vacant property with apple and strychnine and sent a photograph of one night's kill to the then Chief Inspector of Rabbits, Mr. Arnold. (The photograph is reproduced in this article.) Soon after this the authorities began to take an interest in the problem."

Fig. 1.—A typical Manjimup scene showing the difficulties associated with rabbit control in this area—the tall karri trees and the bracken fern

—Photo by C. D. Gooding.

Mr. Rooney said that during this period unemployment was rife and clearing gangs were being given part-time work in maintaining clearings on vacant Group Locations. Some gangs were then placed on the vacant properties to lay poison baits and to dig out rabbit warrens.

As the work was all done by hand it was costly and not very successful. In most cases the area under pasture on each property would not exceed 70 acres, but the cost of rabbit destruction on each holding by this method ranged from £10 to £40 in 1933. A Vermin Inspector was employed for the first time by the Warren Vermin Board. He was paid £5 a week and had to find his own conveyance. The Inspector purchased a secondhand motor cycle and rode it over corrugated roads for six days a week. His initial efforts, directed towards obtaining co-operation from settlers, were a dismal failure—Group Settlers were vacating their properties in large numbers and those who remained could hardly be expected to carry out rabbit control work on their properties while on every side of them abandoned farms served as breeding grounds.

At this time, settlers were offered free supplies of phosphorus poison and pollard to bait adjoining vacant properties. The gesture was well-meant but hardly practicable, and the Chief Inspector of Rabbits realised this when he visited farms almost entirely surrounded by vacant properties.

An offer was then made to provide the wages for three men and to recoup the Vermin Board for poisoning material used on vacant Agricultural Bank properties. Three old IXL poison carts were also loaned to the Board.

The first task was to train men to use the poison carts effectively. The usual practice in those days was to run a single furrow as near as possible to the bush surrounding the pastures. This method only gave mediocre results.

From experience in handling badly-infested areas, said Mr. Rooney, it was soon found that numerous furrows and ample small baits gave the best percentage of kills. As the poison-cart drivers became more experienced, some spectacular results were obtained and Mr. Rooney personally counted over 500 dead rabbits on one small property after the poison cart had been used to lay phosphorised pollard baits.

Some of the settlers were keenly interested in the work of rabbit destruction. Others were antagonistic and their attitude towards the vermin destruction regulations varied from passive resistance to outright hostility.

Eventually, the Vermin Board took legal action against 13 settlers for not destroying rabbits on their properties. The charges were proved and they were fined 5s. each with 7s. 6d. costs. This action forced others to make at least a show of compliance although quite a few furrows were ploughed which were never baited.

THE BOTULISM OUTBREAK

At about this time, botulism (toxic paralysis) took toll of a number of cattle in the Manjimup and West Manjimup districts.

The outbreak was of a particularly virulent type and some dairy herds were almost wiped out. It was not unusual to hear of cows being milked in the evening and found dead outside the yards next morning.

As the deaths followed fairly closely after the use of phosphorus most people who lost stock were convinced that the poison was responsible. Confidence in the use of poisons only returned after successful vaccination against botulism had proved that the poison itself was not the cause of cattle deaths.

As more properties became vacant, it was necessary to employ more poison cart drivers and from about 1934 onward there were usually five to six operating during the summer months. In districts where most of the properties were abandoned, this wholesale poisoning gave spectacular results and in some areas the rabbits were practically wiped out.

In other districts, the haphazard use of poison led to the rabbits becoming "educated" and phosphorus baits were ineffective.

It was decided to follow up the summer phosphorus campaign with autumn poisoning using apples and strychnine, but as all the apples for "free feeding" and poisoning had to be cut by hand, this method was expensive and was only used in badly-infested areas.

Later however, a greatly-increased price for rabbit-skins provided an incentive, and experienced men were supplied with apples and strychnine free by the Vermin Board.

Fig. 2.—Some of the rabbits killed by poison on Mr. Rooney's property in 1932
—Photo W. J. Rooney.

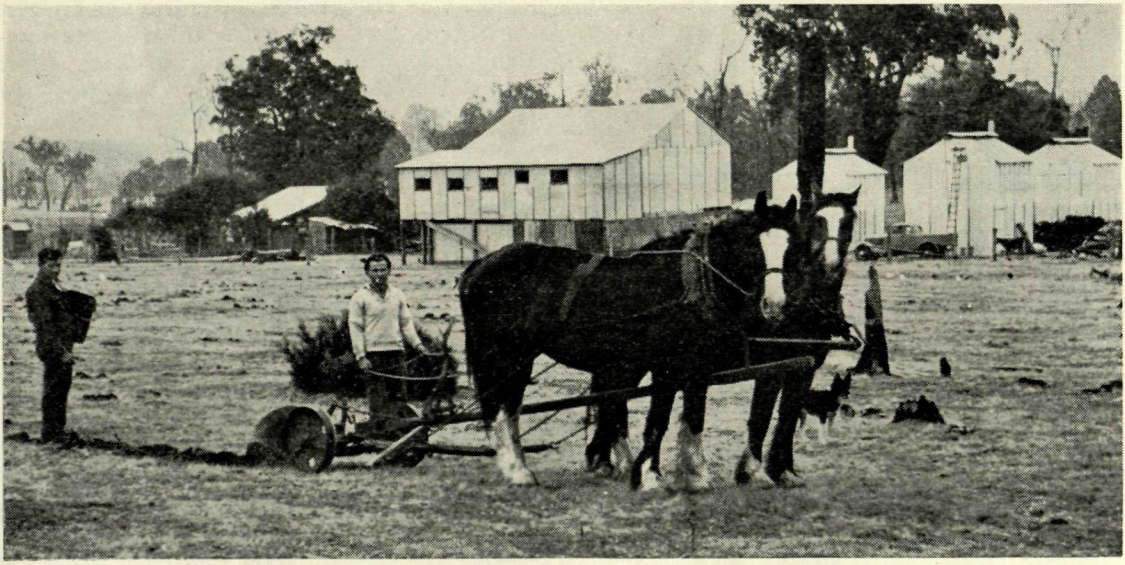

Fig. 3.—Furrow cutting and free feeding as it was done in the "early days"
Photo—C. D. Gooding.

Some of these men made substantial cheques from the sale of rabbit skins and they markedly reduced the rabbit populations.

Practically 100 per cent. kills were obtained at this time where the correct techniques of free feeding and baiting were used.

SOME AMUSING MEMORIES

Mr. Rooney recalls some quaint methods of poisoning used by inexperienced settlers. He found one man preparing apple baits by cutting the fruit into quarters then gouging out a neat hole in each piece of fruit with a pen-nib—being careful to remove a cylindrical piece of apple undamaged. With a fine-pointed knife, he placed some strychnine in the hole and then carefully relaced the plug—a very neat job, but one that hardly made for speed in preparation.

Another settler complained that the rabbits would not eat phosphorised pollard. He had mixed the poison and pollard neat. Given a few hints on the correct preparation of the baits, he failed again—this time by using a whole bottle of oil of aniseed as a lure, instead of the required few drops.

Fig. 4.—Today all the furrow cutting and bait laying done by the Agriculture Protection Board is done mechanically. Here oats are being dropped from a Land Rover into a furrow cut previously by the same vehicle
—Photo by C. D. Gooding.

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One man complained that putting out phosphorised pollard was the most tedious job he had ever encountered. He had mixed it as a thin gruel and was trying to splash it into the furrow with a stick!

A German settler suggested that it might be a good idea to throw superphosphate down the rabbits warrens. When asked why he thought it might destroy rabbits, he said, "Vell, she always make my eyes leak."

The mixing of baits in tins that had contained kerosene or sump oil was not uncommon and it took much patient explanation to persuade some of the settlers to adopt tried methods of poisoning.

Fig. 5.—Mr. Rooney inspecting a furrow to check on the poison "take," after a successful "1080" poisoning —Photo by C. D. Gooding.

The poisoning of vacant properties by the Vermin Board with some assistance from the Central Vermin Authority was completely justified. Each poisoning season the majority of settlers would lay poison at the time poison carts were operating, or would ask to have their properties poisoned by the Board's carts. This latter procedure eventually became a severe embarrassment to the Board. Some settlers were inclined to place the sole responsibility for complete control on the Board and became demanding and critical. There would also be a clamour to have the work done at certain times and there was also several claims for damages for stock lost, presumably from eating poisoned baits. Nevertheless, with all its drawbacks, the poisoning of privately-owned properties was justified inasmuch as it gave settlers a working example of the results that could be obtained by using sufficient furrows and ample baits.

During the middle and late 1930's, rabbits had been building up in the Northcliffe district and as about two-thirds of the properties there had been vacated, poison carts were sent each year to poison all these blocks, although, with the exception of a couple of areas, the infestations were generally light.

Whether the initial poisoning campaign took effect before the rabbits became firmly established, or whether some other factor exercised control, is not clear—but the fact remains that rabbits are scarcer in the Northcliffe area today, than they were 20 years ago.

MINERAL DEFICIENCIES

Some years ago, rabbits increased almost to plague proportions on some South Coast grazing leases. The country was good coastal run with numerous flats and gullies carrying various native grasses. The rabbits cleaned out the grasses leaving only the scrub.

Assistance was given the owners to poison with apples and strychnine and while carrying out the free feeding preparatory to poisoning, several freshly dead rabbits were picked up.

They were in poor condition and appeared anaemic. Most of the coastal country is deficient in copper and cobalt, and stock could only be left on the area for a limited period or they developed "coast disease." Rabbits have decreased in numbers over most of this area and mineral deficiency could be the answer.

It is noticeable that where stock were subject to "wasting disease" and "falling sickness," prior to the introduction of Denmark lick, rabbits which built up to nuisance numbers at times, usually decreased gradually.

In the Walpole area, rabbits were becoming very numerous in 1936 but after the area was swept by a severe bushfire in 1937 they disappeared almost completely and have not reappeared in large numbers since. This area is also deficient in certain minerals.

Looking back over the years, the early results obtained with both phosphorus and strychnine were particularly good. As the years passed, the rabbits apparently became more wary and could only be controlled by carefully-planned and well-executed campaigns.

The latest chapter of the story of man's war against the rabbit is now being written, and the new poison—"1080"—is achieving excellent results.

AGRICULTURAL SEED PRODUCTION

Favourable conditions for the harvesting of subterranean clover seed continued during February and in most districts good yields are being obtained and production of certified seed to the end of the month was as follows:—

	Tons.
Dwalganup	630
Mt. Barker	60
Yarloop	162
	852

More than 700 tons were tested and sealed during February, the largest tonnage handled by the Department in any one month. The Great Southern and lower Midlands contributed largely to this total.

The large local harvest and satisfactory yields in other States have resulted in prices being considerably lower than in previous seasons. Quantities of all strains have already been exported to the Eastern States.

Several lines of the Yarloop strain submitted for certification have been rejected because of a germination below the requirement of 70 per cent. This has been due to a high proportion of the seed being scorched when burning to destroy the top growth prior to rolling. Burning of the Dwalganup strain can be carried out with safety as the burrs are buried, but with the later strains varying proportions of the burrs are formed above the soil. A large amount of trash not only causes a severe fire but induces a greater amount of the seed to be formed above ground level. Under such circumstances, if burning cannot be avoided it should be regulated to cause the minimum of heat such as when moist with dew. Firing in sections rather than having a complete severe burn also helps. Where possible the top growth should be removed by other means.

In one case further grading was necessary because of the presence of the Guildford grass seeds.

One hundred and fifty-two bushels of Westralia bean seed have been certified so far this season and one half ton of Phalaris tuberosa temporarily sealed, awaiting germination tests.

Increased production of both Western Australia and New Zealand blue lupins has resulted in a large number of samples being received at the seed testing laboratory. There has been an improvement in pure seed content from previous years but the germination of the Western Australian species has, in the main, been unsatisfactory. Harvesting and cleaning methods are being investigated with a view to improving quality.

The germination of most lines of New Zealand blue lupin produced in the Boyup Brook and Bridgetown districts has been satisfactory. The experience gained no doubt will result in seed of higher quality in future years and it should be possible for production to at least meet the State's requirements.

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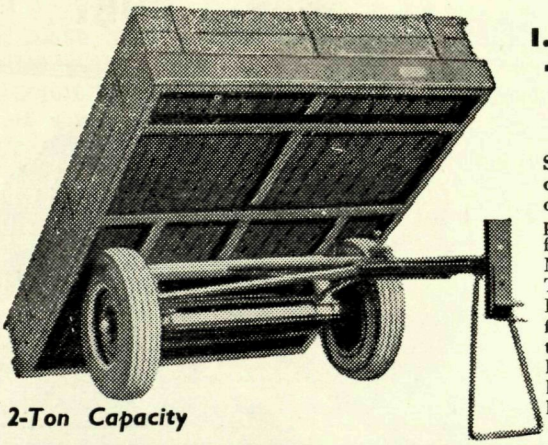

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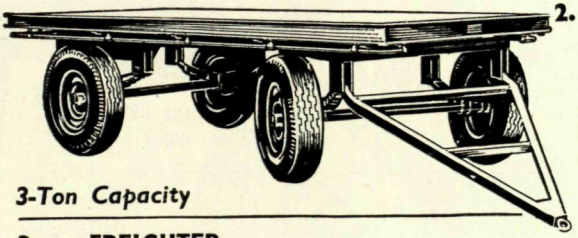

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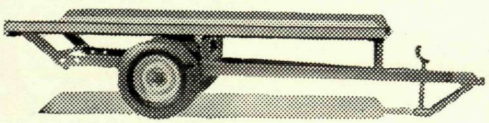

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