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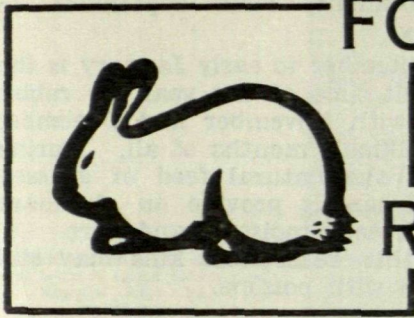
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FOOD FOR THOUGHT IN RABBIT POISONING

By J. W. LEIGHTON, Supervising Vermin Control Officer, Agriculture Protection Board

SINCE the introduction of the "1080" Poisoning Unit Scheme in 1955 by the Agriculture Protection Board reasonable control of rabbit numbers has been obtained. Besides this many important side effects have resulted.

One of these is that farmers throughout the agriculture areas of Western Australia have been introduced to the science of rabbit poisoning. The officers administering the scheme have also gained many useful and practical ideas during this time.

Before the introduction of the poisoning scheme it was obvious that most farmers had little knowledge of the orthodox methods of pre-feeding or poisoning rabbits, other than mixing and laying—often badly—the well-known phosphorus poisons.

The phosphorus poisons were normally offered to the rabbits in March, when most feed—and certainly all of the good feed—had been eaten out.

Few farmers considered it was worthwhile trying to poison rabbits at any other time of the year, although it was well known that if carefully applied, strychnine or arsenic on oats or apples, would obtain good results during the winter and spring.

"1080"

Before the "1080" Poisoning Unit Scheme was launched the Agriculture Protection Board carried out extensive summer and winter poisoning trials in the South-West, with satisfactory results. The new "miracle" poison "1080" was then offered to the public as an all-year-round

poison capable of obtaining good kills no matter what natural feed supplies were available.

At certain times of the year rabbits are easy to poison, the only ingredients required for success being oats or apples, "1080" poison, and a well-placed trail.

At the other times of the year, common sense and an understanding of the feeding habits and diet of the rabbit are also necessary.

TIME OF POISONING

Rabbits are known to be selective feeders, but it is doubtful whether anyone realises just how selective their feeding habits are.

As with many other animals nature has endowed the rabbit with the ability to select, where available, the right balance of food to maintain a healthy body. The most important requirements in the diet are protein, fibre, and moisture, the natural supplies of which vary with the seasons of the year.

The supply of these items available to the rabbits depends on locality as well as season, and no hard and fast rule can be given stating the correct time of the year to use any particular bait or in what quantity it should be used.

Generally, however, in Western Australia the year may be divided into three distinct periods for rabbit poisoning:

1. **The growing season months of May, June, July, August and September.**

During these months the natural feed is young and lush and contains a high percentage of protein and moisture but very little fibre. Feeds with a high fibre content are therefore attractive baits at this time, and oats are ideal.

From repeated trials and observations it has been noted that rabbits will eat large quantities of dry oats at this time. From the farmer's point of view this is the best time of the year to poison, especially if operations are carried out following the first flush of green and before the first litter of kittens is born and able to fend for itself.

Rabbits become localised in their movements during this part of the year, which is the breeding season. Females select their warrens and stay there during the breeding season; the males make their attachments and also remain localised during this period. This means that apart from the odd barren doe, or an unlucky male, rabbit migration, local or otherwise, is dormant.

If rabbits are cleaned up on a property early in the season, the property will remain clear until later in the season, when young rabbits may move in from overcrowded warrens in neighbouring areas. The important point is that the property will have had a rabbit free growing season.

2. **The Difficult Time—September to January.**

From September to early January is the most difficult time of the year for rabbit poisoning, with November and December the most difficult months of all. During this period the natural feed of grasses, clover and cereals provide an abundant supply of protein, moisture and fibre.

Despite this, reasonable kills may still be obtained with poisons.

Change in Diet

Rabbits, in common with many other animals, like a change in diet, and it appears that this is the reason why they will accept oats during this period.

Great care is required in the pre-feeding stage and furrow placement. It is a change in diet the rabbits are seeking and not the feed, therefore only enough oats should be laid to attract the rabbits' curiosity—5 lb. of oats to the mile is enough for pre-feeding. (During the earlier period, the same furrow would probably require 16 to 20 lb. to the mile.)

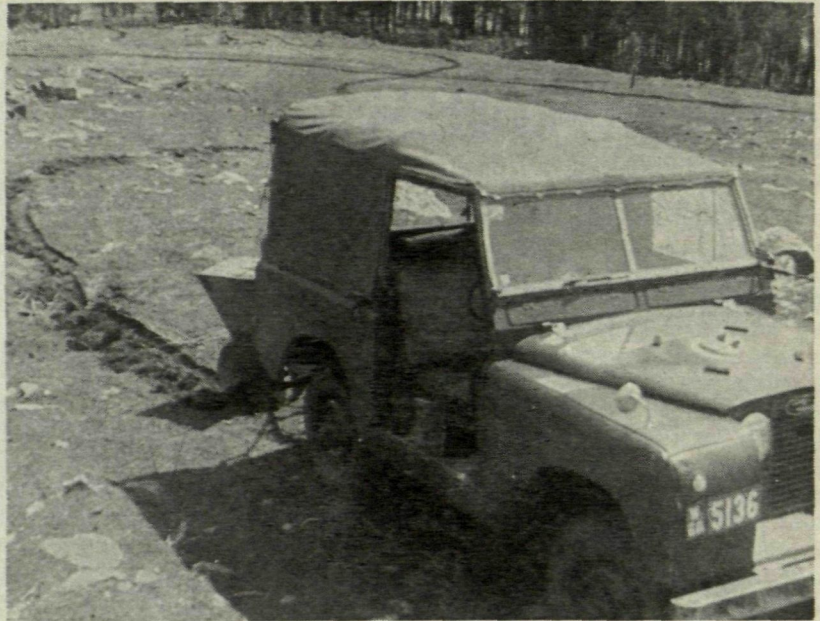
Spaced pre-feeding at this time, say 5 lb. of oats every other day for a week would probably obtain better results than consecutive nightly feeding. The poisoned bait should be laid in a plentiful supply on the final day.

Apart from the danger of too much poisoned bait being left, it is impossible to over-poison a furrow for rabbits, but it is possible to under-poison.



Experimental poisoning carried out with a horse-drawn shave plough and laying baits by hand

The modern method of poisoning with a Land Rover and Port Eighty bait laying machine



Apples

If November and December are dry, a low protein low fibre bait such as apple which has a high moisture content is a more successful bait medium than oats.

Reports that rabbits take the first and second pre-feed of oats and then lose interest in taking further feeds from the furrow in the months of November and December indicate that pre-feeding is being overdone in some cases, and that having had their change of diet, the rabbits are satisfied before the actual poisoned bait was laid.

3. The Popular Time—January to May.

This extends from mid-January until the opening rains produce green feed. During this period, rabbits become easier to poison as the season progresses.

The important factors are:—

- (a) By this time rabbits are fully or nearly fully grown, they are capable of masticating the bait and are able to traverse widely in the feeding areas. As food becomes more scarce the feeding areas extend and assist in overcoming failures due to bad furrow placement.
- (b) Quality and quantity of feed available are reduced. Crops have been

harvested and pasture seeds have fallen thus reducing the supply of protein. Fibrous feeds become weathered and deteriorate in quality, and moisture is lacking.

The situation during this period is almost the reverse of that in the early winter when there is an abundance of proteins and moisture and very little fibre. Both oats and apples are ideal baits during this period. Oats supply protein and fibre and apples supply moisture.

Poisoning rabbits during this period is not difficult as there is less competition for food and consequently not the need for as much care in application as during the difficult period.

Migration

Towards the end of this period rabbits become restless and parental and social demands cause at least a local migration. Females begin their search for a suitable home and the males follow. Thus a property which has been cleared of rabbits by poisoning early in this period may be reinfested towards the end of the period by migratory rabbits searching for breeding places before the opening rains arrive.

This shows that the best time to poison is immediately after this movement, when the rabbits are settling down in preparation for breeding.