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Rabbits are scarce ... make them scarcer still!

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RABBITS

are

SCARCE . . .

MAKE THEM SCARCER STILL !

By C. MARSHALL, Senior Vermin Control Officer

NEVER before in the history of rabbits in Western Australia has control work been so important as it is today. Strangely enough, it is not large numbers of rabbits which make stricter control necessary, but the relatively low numbers now present. Following the introduction by the Agriculture Protection Board of the disease myxomatosis, and later the new poison "1080", the rabbit population in this State has been reduced to a point where farmers are inclined to take their old enemy too cheaply. Because they do not see the rabbits around in the numbers of previous years, they are inclined to neglect control work, or to dismiss it as unimportant.

This could be the greatest mistake they have ever made, and may be the opportunity rabbits require to re-establish themselves.

RESIDUAL RABBITS VERY SHY

Field officers of the Vermin Control Branch have observed that rabbits to-day are truly wild and very seldom seen during the light of day. They prefer to feed under cover of darkness. This of course leads some farmers to underestimate the true position, and in fact to live in a fool's paradise. I am sure that if the position is inspected carefully, it will be found that some rabbits have survived in all areas previously infested, and that they only wait for farmers to relax their efforts before they stage their come-back.

RECENT DEVELOPMENTS

Some very important and interesting developments have been noted from our field and investigational work over the years. We have found that rabbits can be controlled by the use of poison bait—two drives a year being most effective if properly carried out. I say "controlled" not "exterminated." If the latter result is required, it will be necessary to destroy all warrens and other cover. This is in addi-

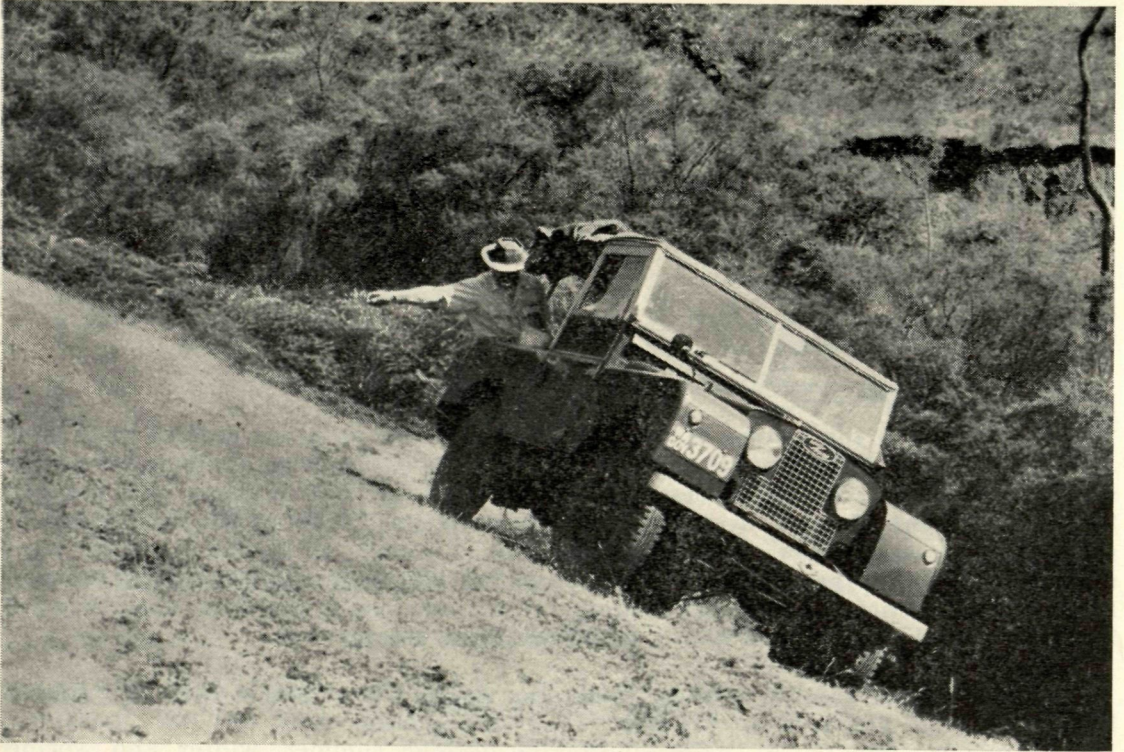
tion to the use of poison bait. If properly applied, poison bait will be successful during the summer, winter and spring months, regardless of the type and quantity of the natural feed available.

OATS AND APPLES WITH "1080"

Plain oats or fruit are both suitable for free feeding and baiting if used with "1080" poison. It must always be remembered that free feeding is the essential part of a successful poison drive; without it, high percentage kills cannot be expected.

IMPORTANCE OF PROPER TRAILS

The placement of the trails and the care taken in making them also have a major bearing on the final results. All trails must be taken to the rabbit—this is important. We have proved that rabbits will not change their habits appreciably to visit trails which are outside the area they have been feeding over. It is possible to miss some rabbits entirely by having the trail just a few yards in the wrong direction. This trail placement is specially important when bush and other cover are present. We have proved conclusively that rabbits from areas with no natural feed can be controlled by the use of poison



Laying "1080" poisoned baits on a property in the Balingup district

bait; it is purely a matter of placing the bait to the best advantage. All farmers should study the habits of the rabbits on their properties before cutting the trails. They will be amply rewarded for the time spent.

COMPLETE ERADICATION

Complete eradication, without the destruction of warrens and other cover is not practicable but this should be the final aim of any control programme undertaken by the landholders. We know that it may not be convenient for farmers to undertake this type of work and complete it in one season, but we do recommend that some plan should be adopted to provide for the progressive destruction of all harbourage, even if the plan is spread over a number of years. A two-fold benefit will result from this work—the reduction of the fox and rabbit pests, and improved pasture for stock.

ORGANISED DESTRUCTION DRIVES

Another important lesson we have learnt during our investigations is the

value of organised drives. These drives must be arranged to cover large areas simultaneously, and every farmer should participate if the maximum benefit is to be obtained. The success of this work will depend on the complete co-operation of farmers, vermin boards and this Department. I consider this can best be obtained through our Group Vermin Inspectorial schemes. These schemes enable the A.P.B. to make full use of the organisation and information at its disposal, and to use its plant and equipment to the best advantage.

SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

There are several important factors in rabbit control which require careful thought. We have now reached the stage when it is quite safe to claim that rabbits are controlled (but not eradicated). They have been reduced to such a low level that the average farmer very seldom sees one on his property. This creates a false sense of security in the mind of the landholder, and often leads to neglect. What must be remembered is this— (1) Due to the large

reduction in numbers, the feed near their natural cover is now plentiful and therefore the rabbits have no reason to travel far from that cover (2) Due again to reduced populations resulting from the intense destruction campaigns against them over the past three years, the rabbits have become very timid and seldom leave the cover during the day. (3) Although rabbit numbers are few, they are scattered over a large area, and to get this few, farmers must be prepared to lay the same amount of poison trail as they would have laid when they poisoned for large numbers. Reduce the amount of free feed and poison bait by all means, but do not reduce the length of the trail.

The same principle applies to warrens. Although they may appear to be dead, destroy them. They may have a few rabbits sheltering in them.

The cost of destroying the odd rabbit to-day may be as high as £1 per head. But this expenditure now could be the means of saving hundreds in future years.

UP-TO-DATE HINTS ON RABBIT CONTROL WORK

The following few points are well worth remembering when planning rabbit control programmes.

Do not depend on or wait for the myxomatosis virus to produce a miracle on your property. Do not rely entirely on one type of control; use all methods available. Do not operate as an individual; insist on the introduction of the drive system in your district. See that all holdings are included

in such drives. Before commencing your drive, make sure that you know where the rabbits harbour and lay your trails accordingly. Do not stint the length of your trail. Do not miss any areas because you consider the few rabbits unimportant; they will soon prove you wrong. Free feed prior to laying poison bait. This is a **MUST** if you wish for the best results, and only the best will suffice in rabbit control. Feed according to the requirements of the rabbits visiting the trails, and continue feeding for three or four days. Do not poison until the trails are clear of the free feed. Do not be mean when laying poison bait—16 lb. to the mile of trail for the average rabbit infestation; you can estimate the amount required from the free feed taken.

Destroy all cover. Warrens, logs and other harbourage remain an open invitation for travelling rabbits to take up residence. They also protect rabbits from their natural enemies.

The main materials used in the preparation of rabbit bait are now oats and apples. When used with "1080" poison in the A.P.B. scheme, no preparation is required with either bait, apart from the cutting of the apples. When using strychnine with oats, the oats must be sweetened by the addition of molasses.

One rule which must always be remembered is that of cleanliness. Be sure that you use nothing but the best materials. Water and utensils must be clean and fresh; rabbits will not take bait that is dirty, stale, or contaminated in any way.

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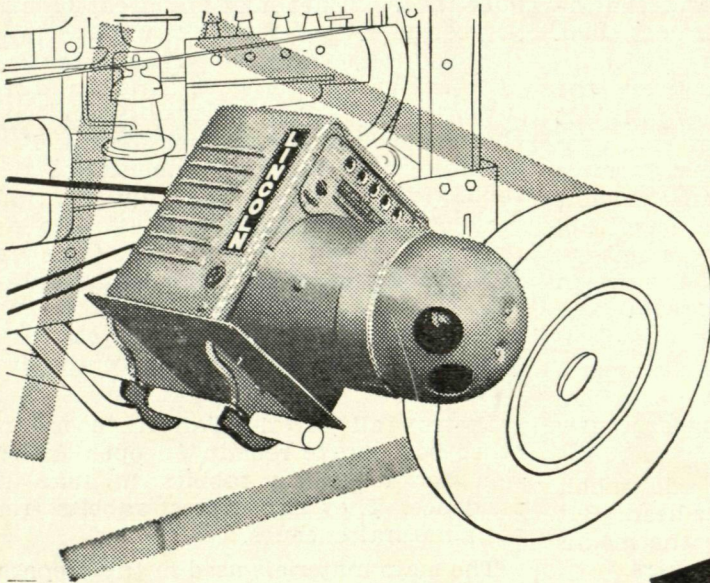
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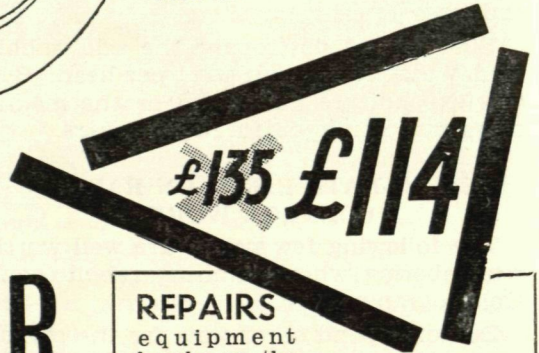
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