



Department of
Primary Industries and
Regional Development

Journal of the Department of Agriculture, Western Australia, Series 4

Volume 1
Number 6 *June, 1960*

Article 11

1-1-1960

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Recommended Citation

Marshall, C (1960) "Hit rabbits this winter : it will check breeding and give more valuable feed for summer grazing," *Journal of the Department of Agriculture, Western Australia, Series 4*: Vol. 1: No. 6, Article 11. Available at: https://researchlibrary.agric.wa.gov.au/journal_agriculture4/vol1/iss6/11

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Hit Rabbits This Winter

It Will Check Breeding and Give More Valuable Feed for Summer Grazing

By C. MARSHALL, Field Superintendent,
Agriculture Protection Board

NOW that the current summer "1080" Rabbit Drive is drawing to a close, it is time we considered our future plans. I am afraid that in the past most farmers have relied far too much on summer control as the complete answer to rabbit destruction and that this reliance has increased considerably following the introduction of "1080" poison, plus the valuable assistance received from the myxomatosis virus.

This dependence on annual drives is a legacy from the days when phosphorus poison was considered to be the answer to the rabbit problem, and I believe most of us still remember the disappointing kills obtained from this bait. Observations during the past two seasons indicate that we may be heading in the same direction again. Rabbits are definitely increasing and the annual summer drive has failed to hold the population down to a safe level, with the result that we have a slightly larger population to carry throughout the winter, which in turn means increased breeding. This trend has become most noticeable during the past two seasons.

I do not claim that rabbits have reached the numbers prior to myxomatosis and "1080," but they are on their way back and that now is the time for all conscientious farmers to make the effort to stop them.

Following the introduction of "1080" poison, the Agriculture Protection Board tried to interest landholders in winter and spring control. We received limited support for this idea and the work undertaken gave very encouraging results, with considerable numbers of breeding does destroyed. However, weather conditions during winter make the organisation of unit work difficult and continuous interruptions from rain discouraged most farmers. We also had to overcome the lack of interest that followed the reduction in rabbit numbers.

Today, we have still another problem to face—the commercial value of rabbits. Past history of rabbit control should convince farmers that neither trapping or summer drives in themselves will solve our present problem.

What can we do to overcome the steady build-up in rabbit numbers? I believe that we will find the answer in winter work. Summer control is fairly easy. Rabbits will quickly make their presence known by concentrating on the choicest areas of feed, and signs will be clear and numerous. Therefore, if trails are placed correctly and fed wisely, we must obtain a fairly high percentage kill.

With winter work, the degree of skill required is far greater. Rabbits are scattered and leave few signs; feed is usually plentiful and rabbits have no reason to travel far from their shelter. To successfully destroy them we must first locate all pockets of infestation and then plan our programme accordingly. Every pocket, no matter how small, should receive treatment. Remember, one doe rabbit destroyed in winter can mean at least 20 less to feed through the spring and summer.

WINTER CONTROL

If using poison bait, cut trails close to and around all cover and warrens; feed according to recommended methods and keep on feeding until you are reasonably sure that most rabbits in the vicinity are visiting your trail. I would suggest that

you feed from six to seven days before baiting. The time spent on this work will be well repaid by the results obtained. If your work is interrupted by rain, do not abandon the trail but keep feeding. This can be reduced to every second or third day until the weather settles. Some farmers have been known to feed for up to three weeks under similar circumstances. You will find that rabbits will not desert the trail and you will also notice that they will welcome a feed of grain during wet, cold weather. When you consider conditions are safe, poison the trail.

One of the most important points to remember in rabbit control is that you cannot afford to forget this pest for long periods. A number of farmers do a reasonably good job and promptly forget the rabbits until the following year. Some do a not-so-good job and blame their neighbours or adjoining bush for the rabbits they fail to kill. Some trap, and drive a large percentage of rabbits away on to the adjoining properties, then claim good results. The man who really gets results is the farmer who keeps re-checking his work and, if not satisfied, repeats the job, keeping at the rabbits until he has beaten them.

ANNUAL CONTROL

The ideal programme for each year should be planned along the following lines. Poison the entire infested areas early in the summer, say, during January; repeat the work again in May if necessary; rip all warrens and destroy cover during the summer and autumn months. Regularly check known infested spots throughout the year; fumigate any warrens that have opened and re-rip if practical. Spot poison all pockets of rabbits noted and repeat every six weeks throughout the winter and spring if you consider this is justified. Remember, a few rabbits soon become many, if neglected.

Do not rely on the Agriculture Protection Board's "1080" Units for complete control. Do as much of your own work as possible, in fact, do it all, if you can, and above all don't place your faith in trapping. Use traps by all means if you wish, but include this type of work as part of your over-all effort and not as a control in itself. Do not try to poison rabbits following trapping—let at least three weeks elapse before making the attempt.

The Agriculture Protection Board has been accused of encouraging a policy favouring summer drives to the exclusion of other work. This is not correct.

We have been forced into this position because this is the only period of the year when it is possible to get the majority of farmers to co-operate and a drive of this nature is the best method at our disposal for the mass destruction of rabbits, but in addition to summer work we have always strongly advocated the continuation of control throughout the year by encouraging farmers to spot poison pockets of rabbits, fumigate and rip warrens, destroy cover and generally harass the rabbit at all times. Our advice to farmers is to destroy rabbits when you see them. There has also been considerable comment on rabbit migrating from virgin bush country to re-infest cleared holdings.

We acknowledge that rabbits do exist in most of our uncleared lands, also on the coastal strips. However, the numbers are only a fraction of those living on developed country. We also admit that these rabbits are a nuisance, but do not agree that they are the major cause of our present problem. The Agriculture Protection Board, in co-operation with local Road Boards, Forestry, Railways, and other interested authorities, has steadily increased the work of control over undeveloped areas during the past three years, and we hope that, given time, this problem will be overcome.

Our vast undeveloped areas make the possibility of eradicating rabbits very remote. The best we can hope to achieve is partial control, and to obtain this everyone must work continuously on the problem. Without this continuous work we will not maintain the progress made during the past six years. Unfortunately, rabbit control is a never-ending job, requiring our continuous attention. Results from our work are not always obvious and returns may be slow. Nevertheless, the benefit is there, as many farmers have proven from increased production over the past years.

DECOMMERCIALISATION

There has been lively interest shown in the suggested decommercialisation of rabbits, with references to the value of rabbit carcasses on the export market. Suggestions have been made that trapping should be encouraged.

Commercial trappers had a free hand for many years, and the net result from their efforts was more rabbits. However, let us put aside the question of what we consider to be the best method for destroying this pest and have a look at the cash angle as it affects the farmers. At present inflated prices, rabbits are returning up to 5s. per pair. It is considered that eight rabbits will displace one sheep. Some authorities give this figure as six rabbits. However, let us take eight rabbits for our figure. Four pairs of rabbits at 5s. means a return of £1. Now, compare this with the average value of a breeding ewe and her progeny. The State average wool clip, per head, is 9 lb., with an average price of 4s. 6d. per pound. Add to this a lambing percentage of 75 per cent. for the flock and value the lamb at a low figure of 30s. To this we add the value of the ewe herself at £3 per head, and this gives us a total return of £6 10s. 6d. as against £1 for the rabbit. I doubt if anyone could justify the farming of rabbits on these figures. There is still another point we must not overlook and I refer to the farmers themselves, who, as a rule, do not receive any benefit from commercial trapping. This means that to them rabbits are a dead loss.

I believe that most thinking people now realise that there is no easy way for controlling rabbits, and until such time as we all decide to intensify our efforts in all fields of control, rabbits will continue to be a problem.

I take this opportunity to remind all farmers of the following well known and most important points that must be considered when planning control work. Rabbits are timid and suspicious. They take fright easily and every care should be taken not to disturb them before commencing control work.

Make sure that you have a full knowledge of all infested areas requiring treat-

ment. Study their feeding habits and place your trails to the best advantage. Be sure to cover all areas. Your trail should be wide and shallow. Use only the best baiting materials; make sure this is clean and free from contamination. The same applies to all utensils used in mixing and storing the bait.

Free feed generously, but do not over feed. Increase or decrease the amount of feed daily according to the condition of the trail. Don't try any short cuts; it doesn't pay.

Success is not possible all the time. Factors unknown to you may be responsible for occasional failures. If not satisfied with results repeat the work at a later date. Sufficient baits should be laid to ensure that all rabbits visiting the trail are provided for. If no bait remains after the first night, lightly re-poison the trail. Leave the bait down for at least three to four days before covering.

Do not put stock back on the area treated before examining trails to see that all bait has been taken or covered.

Destroy all cover harbouring rabbits. Fumigate warrens in rocks, creek banks, bush, etc. Rip those in open paddocks.

Follow up ripping by fumigating any holes re-opened. It is always advisable to poison before ripping.

If apples are available they should be used in preference to oats during the dry season. Oats should be used for winter and spring baiting. A few apples mixed with the oats will help to destroy foxes. Never bait where stock is grazing. In summer, keep your trails well out from cover and warrens. In winter, work close to cover and warrens; this helps to get the kittens.

Never trap where you intend to poison. Don't confine your work to any particular season of the year. Keep at the rabbits until they are exterminated.



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