

Feral rabbits in the Blue Mountains



Feral rabbits are Australia's most widespread & devastating environmental vertebrate pest

The European rabbit arrived in Australia with the First Fleet and was deliberately released for hunting in the 1800s. Wild rabbits spread across Australia at a rate thought to be the fastest of any colonizing mammal in the world. European rabbits are now found throughout the continent and on several offshore islands. They are widely considered by scientists and governments alike to be one of Australia's most destructive pest animals.

What are the impacts of rabbits in our region?

- In the Blue Mountains, wild rabbits are widespread but in low densities inhabiting parks, sporting fields, golf courses, cemeteries, road reserves, bushland reserves, and private properties.
- Feral rabbits damage lawns, gardens and playing fields by grazing and digging. They eat the seedlings of native and exotic plants which reduces native plant biodiversity and damages residential gardens.
- Rabbits may cause erosion by over-grazing and digging warrens.
- In the Blue Mountains rabbits prefer to graze exotic grassed areas in the urban landscape such as parks and road reserves while using bushland areas principally for harbour.
- Feral rabbits can provide a key food source to feral cats and foxes and help to sustain high population densities of these pests. Feral rabbit control programs need to be integrated with concurrent feral cat and fox control programs; otherwise prey shifting increases predation pressures on native wildlife following rabbit control.
- Feral rabbit populations are slowly increasing in the Blue Mountains. This is partly attributed to the accidental or deliberate release of pet rabbits and to the progressive reduction in the efficacy of viral diseases such as Mxyomatosis and Rabbit Calicivirus (Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease).

What can you do to help?

- Help map rabbit locations. Map rabbit sightings for your local area & record sightings using **RabbitScan** (feralscan.org/rabbitscan)
- Think carefully before owning a rabbit as a pet. Ensure you understand the effort and commitment required to look after them responsibly. If you no longer can look after your rabbit, rehome it or put the rabbit down, don't dump it in the bush and let it become part of the feral rabbit problem.
- Have your rabbit desexed to avoid unwanted pregnancies.
- Do not feed feral rabbits. If you have them on your property, take steps to control them (see over-leaf for approved control measures).



With sufficient food, rabbits can reproduce all year round. They can start breeding at age four months and in optimal conditions can produce five or more litters per year with up to five young per litter. During breeding, rabbits tend to form territorial groups of 1 to 3 males and 7 to 10 females.



Rabbits cause over \$200 million damage each year through production losses in Australia's agricultural and pastoral industries. Rabbits also cause significant damage to private and community gardens (see above).

The feral rabbit problem

A national issue - seeking local solutions

Wild rabbits and other introduced pests

- Feral rabbits have a complex relationship with other introduced pests. For example, foxes and feral cats predate on rabbits. They sustain their own pest numbers by relying on rabbits as a primary food source. In turn, foxes and cats help to control rabbit populations.
- When seasonal shortages of rabbits occur or rabbits are controlled, however, there is prey switching with an increase in native animals eaten by feral cats and foxes.

Wild rabbit control is not a simple matter

- Feral rabbit control is a complex issue that is difficult and expensive to resolve. In order to succeed, it needs to be strategic and continuous—with an ongoing commitment of significant financial (and other) resources.
- Because feral rabbits are widespread and located in urban and urban bushland interface areas, broad-scale management can be cost-prohibitive. Whilst targeted feral rabbit management is more achievable, it is typically only effective when cross tenure programs can be established where all landholders commit to control rabbits on their property simultaneously.
- Rabbit proof exclusion fencing around backyards and veggie patches, both protect gardens and restricts access to nutritious food sources that support higher rabbit population densities.
- Effective feral rabbit management needs to be ongoing to avoid repopulation after the initial removal of wild rabbits.
- Feral rabbit control programs need to be integrated with concurrent feral cat and fox control programs in order to control the impact of these pest animals on native wildlife as they prey-switch in the absence of rabbits.

What are the options for wild rabbit control?

Techniques for rabbit control are described as biological, chemical and mechanical, with biological controls proving the most effective.

- Biological controls include the use of viruses that only affect rabbits (Myxoma virus & Calicivirus). Whilst these have previously reduced rabbit numbers significantly, feral rabbits have developed genetic resistance over time. As such, research is underway to identify new virus strains for use in feral rabbit control. A new strain of Rabbit Calicivirus (RHDV) was released nationwide in 2017 but is being found to be less effective in temperate high rainfall areas than arid areas.
- Chemical controls include poisons laid as baits (ie. Pindone) or fumigation of warrens (eg. carbon monoxide).
- Mechanical controls include the destruction of warrens and above-ground harbours. Lesser used controls.



Pest animals typically maintain 'equilibrium' with each other. Feral rabbits provide a key food source for feral cats.

If rabbits are removed in isolation feral cats and foxes prey-switch and increase their predation of native animals.

It is therefore important that any attempt to control one pest species also integrates control for other introduced pests.



Effective rabbit control requires integration of different methods.

When programs rely on one technique & do not implement continued management, initial gains are lost as rabbits quickly repopulate in the absence of ongoing control.