

Developing a plan

Rabbits will easily move between properties, so it is vital that you work in unison with your neighbours.

Monitoring

The first step is to assess the number of rabbits on your property. This will help you to target your approach, monitor your success and see if you need to change tactics. You should

- Map out the location and number of all active entrances that you can find
- Make a note of any areas that rabbits are using for shelter i.e. where they run to hide
- At dusk, count the number of rabbits that you can see from a vantage point on your property

While you are surveying your property, you should assess the risks of baits to off-target animals such as pets and wildlife. You will also need to check for reinfestation at least once per year.

Set goals

Together with your neighbours, develop a 12-month plan of action using the provided calendar wheel. It only takes a pair of rabbits to re-infest your property, so your program should aim to keep your properties completely rabbit-free.

Example Program

1. Conduct your control activities at the end of summer/start of autumn, when rabbit populations are lower.
2. If safe to do so, reduce the population further by using baits or other techniques such as biological control agents (RHDV K5), ferreting, trapping, and shooting to reduce numbers.
3. Remove safe harbours and destroy warrens (e.g. warren ripping if appropriate, hand digging in burrow entrances and preventing re-infestation of warrens with wire or rabbit proof fencing – see overleaf for more information about these techniques).
4. Monitor your property to ensure all rabbits have been removed. Continue yearly monitoring and repeat control methods if necessary. Persistence is essential.

Your rabbit control program must not affect native wildlife.

Methods

You will need to use all rabbit control measures available, provided they are safe and practical for your property. See over the page for detailed information about methods.

Timing

Rabbit control is most effective in late summer and early autumn, as this is when populations are at their lowest. Use the wheel calendar to time specific activities.

Evaluation

Conduct a second round of monitoring after you've completed your control activities and check to see if all rabbit warrens and entrances are destroyed, and if there are any signs of rabbit activity. Ask yourself:

- What control methods worked well?
- What could be improved?
- Do you need to change your plan?

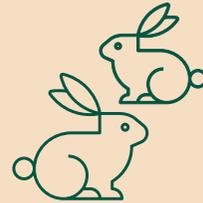
Rabbit Behaviour

Rabbits are territorial and tend to feed in areas close to their warren.

Rabbits are neophobic (scared of new things) – A successful baiting program will rely on 'free feeding' with unbaited food to train rabbits onto the bait.

Rabbits require fresh growth to stimulate breeding. Breeding starts in autumn and will continue until vegetation dries off, generally in early summer. Rabbits can breed all year if conditions are right.

A rabbit is more likely to survive when there is a safe harbour. These can be earth burrows and warrens, blackberry or other weed infestations, and even large discarded waste items such as car bodies, with rabbits sheltering underneath.



Two rabbits can turn into 180 in 18 months. Breaking their breeding cycle through the destruction of warrens or safe harbours is the key to long-term rabbit control.



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Rabbit control for Peri-Urban Landscapes

Why manage rabbits?

In Victoria, rabbits are a serious pest animal. This is because they

- Destroy vegetation and spread weeds
- Compete with stock and native animals for food and habitat
- Cause soil erosion and destabilize riverbanks

Rabbit populations cause significant economic costs to agriculture and horticulture industries and degrade our parks and reserves.

Your legal responsibility

The European Rabbit is an established pest animal under the *Catchment and Land Protection Act 1994 (CaLP Act)*.

The Act states that Land owners (including land managers) have a responsibility to take all reasonable steps to prevent the spread of, and as far as possible eradicate, established pest animals from their land.

This means we all have a role to play in controlling rabbits on our land.

This brochure has been put together to guide you in the most successful control techniques.

We recommend also contacting a qualified pest control professional to assess the rabbit control methods best suited to your property.

Rabbit Control Methods

Current science tells us that the most effective recipe for rabbit control is to reduce rabbit numbers, destroy warrens and remove harbour, then undertake follow up control on any re-invasions.

BAITING

Poison baits can be an effective method of controlling rabbits when used with other methods. Baits are often in the form of poisoned oats or carrots that can be placed in rabbit feeding areas at dusk. Most baits must only be used by someone who is accredited or licenced.

! Bait can pose a risk to wildlife, stock and pets.

How:

- Use your pre-program monitoring to guide your bait placement.
- Free-feed first (put out non-baited food) so that the rabbits become accustomed to the new food source. Free feeding can also be used to determine the amount of bait needed and bait placement, so that only rabbits have access the bait. If you are still concerned with risks to off-target animals, use bait stations (a low cage over the bait) to further restrict access.
- Inform your neighbours of any baiting program you are running and erect signage.
- You MUST remove rabbit carcasses and uneaten bait after a baiting event.
- Always follow product label advice and adhere to the directions for use.

When:

Baiting can be done all year round. However, it will be most effective in late summer and early autumn when populations are down, and alternate feed is scarce.

HARBOUR DESTRUCTION OR REMOVAL

Destroying or removing the shelters and warrens that rabbits use breaks their breeding cycle and exposes them to harsh climates and predators. It also reduces the level of re-infestation from surrounding areas. Removing safe harbours such as blackberry and hard rubbish is essential, especially along waterways. Remember that removal of native vegetation and excavation may require a council permit.

How:

Heavy machinery is most effective for destroying warrens. Ask your local Landcare group or search the internet for earthmoving contractors who specialise in rabbit ripping.

Small infestations can be dug in by hand. Follow these steps to collapse warrens by hand:

1. Identify entrances visually or using smoke
2. Dig from the entrance and follow the tunnel with a mattock or crow bar to the end
3. Compact the collapsed earth
4. Monitor the entrances for re-opening and collapse again if necessary

When:

This can be done all year round but is most effective immediately after numbers have been reduced or after breeding season. Ripping is recommended when soil is dry and friable, so it will easily collapse.

FUMIGATION

Fumigation is a good follow up tool to address any reopening after harbour destruction. It is also an option in areas where baiting is too risky due to off-target species such as wildlife and pets, or areas inaccessible to rippers. You will need a permit to use the chemicals required for fumigating warrens, or you can hire a contractor. The warren should be collapsed after fumigation.

How:

- Identify entrances visually or using smoke
- Walk around the area making loud noises to ensure all rabbits are in the warren
- Follow the instructions on the product label to treat and seal warrens, ensuring they are airtight
- Monitor and repeat 3-4 days later on any holes that have been re-opened. Note that it may take 5-6 attempts to fully shut down a warren

When:

Most effective during the breeding season and 3-4 weeks after baiting.

This information has been modified from Agriculture Victoria. For further information on rabbit control, please refer to their website: <http://agriculture.vic.gov.au>

FERRETING AND LONG-NETTING

Ferrets (or dogs) enter burrows and/or chase rabbits into nets where they are caught and euthanised. This method can be used around any safe harbour. Long-netting involves disturbing rabbits when they are out of their burrows so that they run into a net. These techniques are more targeted and may cause less harm to native wildlife.

How:

You will need to employ contractors or ferreters who are skilled in this work.

When:

Ferreting can be done at any time when rabbits are in warrens. Long-netting usually occurs during the warmer months when rabbits are out of their burrows.

! Note: This technique can be used to remove rabbits, but while the warren remains intact, re-invasion from surrounding areas will occur.

TRAPPING

Trapping is useful for those concerned about off-target animals, but it can have limited success and is very time-consuming. Soft-jawed traps and confinement traps are acceptable for controlling rabbits, although use of these traps is regulated under the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Regulations 2019. The regulations specify the types of traps that can be used, the conditions of use and where they can be used. If you are intending to use traps you must ensure you are meeting the legal requirements.

BIOLOGICAL CONTROL

Myxomatosis and the Calicivirus or Rabbit Haemorrhagic Disease Virus (RHDV) have helped to maintain rabbit populations, ensuring their numbers don't explode to pre-1950 levels. Whilst Myxomatosis is not released anymore, RHDV1-K5 is still available and it can be used in conjunction with other management techniques. However, some rabbits have developed immunity and a proportion will survive an outbreak. RHDV1-K5 is best released when kittens are over 12 weeks of age, because young rabbits often survive an outbreak and will become immune for life.

FENCING

Rabbit Proof fencing is useful to keep rabbits out of smaller areas such as warrens and vegie gardens. You must keep regular maintenance of your rabbit proof fence for it to be effective. Fencing larger areas can be expensive and it's not appropriate for areas with conservation values as it prevents native animals from moving across the landscape.

SHOOTING

Shooting is only viable in rural settings and is more time consuming and labour intensive than other methods.

! Note: Euthanising refers to the act of humanely killing the animal with minimal pain, fear and distress.

