

# Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia

Newsletter Volume 38, June 2023.

## Foundation Matters

Updates and notices for Foundation members and partners.

### Greg Mutze bequest

A very generous bequest has been received from the estate of the late Greg Mutze. Greg was a long term supporter of the Foundation and a dedicated researcher who gained international recognition working on rabbits and other pest animals. In further recognition of Greg's contributions, a former colleague of his has made a similarly generous donation. It is humbling, and uplifting, to receive such support; and it gives us confidence to continue investing in the aims of the Foundation.

### Volunteers

Rabbit-Free Australia relies on volunteers to ensure we can provide professional services while still directing the vast majority of income to the aims of the Foundation; raising awareness, promoting research into better rabbit control, and promoting the adoption of science-based rabbit controls.

Enjoy '[Meet some of our volunteers](#)' to see the different ways our valued volunteers assist. If you, or someone you know, is interested in helping out please get in touch. We have a tonne of ideas to explore and a warm welcome for anyone helping bring them to fruition.



## Membership Options

There are now even more ways to be a member of Rabbit-Free Australia. In a bid to better meet the needs of busy people and organisations, be they a local community or Landcare group, a state agency, an NGO, or a private company the Committee have:

- Enabled an **auto-renewal** (pay by credit card only) option.
- Introduced several **Group options**, where the group can vary the individuals involved as circumstances change, and where there are **concessions for additional members**.
- Reduced the annual fee for **Corporate members**, recognising that their servicing costs and voting rights are identical to individual members.

Annual membership renewals are due soon. Please keep an eye out for your renewal reminder email. If you would like to change to one of the new membership options please get in touch, or log-in to your membership profile and make the change on-line.

There are membership options to suit all needs. For more details see our website ([Join Us](#)) or download [Membership Options](#).

Individual: Yearly renewal	\$50	Family - 2 adults & up to 3 children	\$90
Individual: Auto-renewal	\$50	Group: Up to 3: Self-determined <sup>#</sup>	\$120
Individual: 5 year	\$225	Group: Up to 5: Self-determined <sup>#</sup>	\$190
Individual: Student	\$Nil	Corporate	\$50
<sup>#</sup> Establish your own group ('bundle') and change the individuals in it at any time.			

## Research Projects

Two new research projects have been commissioned by the Foundation this year:

- **Biocontrol model.** David Peacock (University of Adelaide) will explore the potential of a herpesvirus from overseas as a rabbit biocontrol in Australia, using a model of a rabbit population (developed with data from the Turretfield monitoring site). The modelling will indicate whether further work on the prospective biocontrol may be warranted or not.
- **Turretfield tissue library.** Meanwhile, work is underway to save the library of rabbit blood and tissue samples collected over 25 years at the Turretfield site. The samples contain generations of genetic data and information on virus activity. They must be moved from their current storage and rabbit geneticist Amy Iannella will assess and catalogue them prior to relocation in the University of Adelaide's Biobank, safeguarding the resource for future research. Talks are already underway with international researchers on a potential project using the globally significant tissue library.

Major conferences provide opportunities to raise awareness and share knowledge, and to build networks and partnerships. Conference registration fees will be met for speakers at two conferences this year:

- Foundation Patron, Brian Cooke, will present to **Ecological Restoration's world conference** (Darwin) on 'Time lags between action and results in restoration', citing rabbit control with RHDV as an example.
- Executive Officer Peter Day will present at the national conference of the **Australian Rangelands Society** (Broome), on 'Passing the baton: Engaging the next generation in rabbit management'.

### **Peri-Urban Rabbits**

In recognition of the seemingly ever-increasing problems posed by wild rabbits in urban and adjacent lands across Australia, we are now trialling a discussion Forum on peri-urban rabbits. It is a flow-on from the Australian Rabbit Managers Network that we facilitate in a collaboration with CISS.

Around two dozen people have been invited to take part, coming from Landcare type bodies, regional NRM, state agencies and local government, across all States. Two Foundation members, Brian Cooke and Amy Iannella, are contributing as 'in-house experts' to help with any technical queries. It is early days in the trial, but a recent on-line meeting went very well.

The trial will help us explore options to share good science with practitioners and to facilitate them learning from each other, even though separated by thousands of kilometres and administrative barriers. A challenge for us is finding a way to play this important role without it being a drain on resources.

If you're interested in joining the trial Forum, please get in touch.



Rabbit grazing coastal revegetation, Perth, WA.  
Image: Mike Norman, Friends of Sorrento Beach & Marmion Foreshore.

## **Easter Bilby's Friends - children's book**

Our first Easter Bilby's Friends product, a children's book, is now well underway. It will be set in the southern Fleurieu Peninsula (SA) and tell the story of how different animals have been affected by rabbits and how people are coming to their aid. In developing the story we've been at pains to ensure it is well grounded in science (with help from local ecologists) and that it reflects the work of local community groups, NRM bodies and environmental NGOs.

The planning, research and consultation required has been boosted by Vicki Linton coming onboard as a voluntary project officer, bringing a wealth of experience in rabbit control, environmental conservation, and liaison with rural communities. While our first book is on track for release in early 2024, Vicki is already scoping out a follow-up; a story set in south-west WA for release in 2025.



Vicki Linton (voluntary project officer), Carolyn Schultz (Cape Jervis Coastal Community Group), Kristin Martin (author) and Bianca Richardson (illustrator) during a 'familiarisation' field trip, with rabbit-free Kangaroo Island in the background.

## **Rabbit News & Views**

Stories about and from Foundation members and partners.

### **Calicivirus trials - Wardang Island**

What is it like being at the cutting edge of biocontrol research - especially when it doesn't go to plan; no matter how detailed and thorough the plans are?

Former Chair and long time stalwart of Rabbit-Free Australia, Nicholas Newland, reflects on his time as Program Coordinator for the rabbit calicivirus research program that commenced in 1994, including field trials on Wardang Island, SA.

See ['The Rabbit Calicivirus Story'](#) for a brave tale and personal insights into the introduction of RHDV to Australia - an event that has been referred to as one of THE single most effective environmental initiatives of our time.



Researchers, Scott Jennings, Chris Davey, Brian Cooke & Jonathan Hardy, on Wardang Island.

### **Find the story: Science communication**

Bush Heritage Australia does an amazing job of protecting ecosystems and wildlife across the nation - and an equally good job of communicating their work and impact to diverse audiences. Their [News & Media Centre](#) is an online library full of interesting stories and information.

Impressed by the quality of work we asked the Bush Heritage Communications Team about their secrets to success, and were delighted when Bee Stephens agreed to share them with us. Bee's collation of tips is an entertaining read and guide for anyone interested in science communication. Delivering fact-based stories that engage and inform, in ways that are accessible to all, are incredibly important skills for modern organisations. See '[Find the story in facts](#)' for more information and 'how to' tips.



Pictures bring the story to life and help immerse readers within an environment.  
Image: Eliza Herbert

### **Darling Downs-Moreton Rabbit Board. Success is invisible.**

'Success is invisible', observes Craig Magnussen (CEO) in a summary of the Darling Downs-Moreton Rabbit Board in SE Queensland.

The Board maintains a 130 year old rabbit-proof fence around some of the State's premier agricultural land, and backs that up by ensuring landholders effectively control rabbits; with an emphasis on removing warrens and other harbour to prevent breeding.

Communicating the need for rabbit control and research into biocontrols is another priority, and the Board is using 'contemporary strategic communication' to get the messaging right for increasingly urbanised communities.

For more information on the Board and Craig's observations, many of which ring true for any rabbit control program, anywhere, see '[Success is invisible](#)'.

[Back to Contents](#)



Ongoing surveillance, repair and replacement maintain the effectiveness of the Darling Downs-Moreton Rabbit Fence.

### **Rabbit, cat & fox control. A springboard to recovery.**

The 'unholy trinity' of rabbits, feral cats and foxes are a collective threat to many of Australia's most at-risk native animals and ecosystems. A Blog by the National Feral Cat & Fox Management Coordinator (Gill Basnett) and Rabbit-Free Australia's Executive Officer (Peter Day) sets out a case for integrated regional control programs where:

- Rabbits, feral cats and foxes are managed together,
- Actions are coordinated across property boundaries, regardless of tenure and ownership, and
- There is on-going support, monitoring and assistance to the land managers involved.

See their Blog Post in Rabbit-Free Australia's [Member's Lounge](#), and the Fox and Cat control stories in Snippets below.

# Snippets

A smorgasbord of news. Please follow the links to the original source.

## 'Cooke's Index' gets thumbs-up to score rabbit abundance

A recent paper by [Delibes-Mateos et.al.](#) concludes that a method of determining rabbit abundance from a survey of rabbit droppings (pellets) developed by [Cooke and McPhee \(2007\)](#) is as valid in Spain as it is in Australia, proving to be simple, inexpensive and accurate.

Rabbit abundance and density estimate (Cooke B et.al. 2014)		
Rabbit dung sighted in a 15 minute walking survey	Rabbit abundance score	Approximate density (Rabbits/ha)
None found.	0	0
Isolated pellets and pellets in clumps of 5-10, at least 10 metres apart.	1	0.5
Scattered pellets and pellets in clumps, less than 10 metres apart.	2	1
Pellets are common, in larger clumps and occasional buck-heaps, in half the area surveyed.	3	2
Pellets are abundant, in large clumps and buck-heaps; though not across the entire area surveyed.	4	5
Pellets are very abundant, and buck-heaps are always apparent.	5	10 or more

Modified version of Cooke's dung scoring chart. Source [Rabbit-Free Australia](#).

## Pest animal monitoring videos

**Ag Vic** have released a 'how to' video on monitoring rabbits, foxes and feral pigs to assess numbers and the effectiveness of control programs, including camera traps, spotlighting, and activity plots (animal tracks). See [here](#) for more information.

## Golden Plains Shire. Integrated rabbit control

A good example of Local Government leading an integrated rabbit control program comes from the **Golden Plains Shire**, between Geelong and Ballarat in Victoria. They follow-up K5 releases with warren destruction and fumigation. For more information, see [here](#).

## Single species management vs ecosystem management

Ecologist **Charley Krebs** uses NZ as an example to promote 'a stable system of ecosystem management' as more likely to succeed in **vertebrate pest control** than a focus on single species. See [here](#) to read the Blog.

## Fox control can increase cat numbers

A Journal of Applied Ecology article suggests fox control can lead to increases in cat numbers - more reason to promote integrated rabbit, fox and cat control. See the article [here](#).

## Control rabbits first, then cats

Landscape recovery on **Macquarie Island** shows the importance of controlling rabbits first, then feral cats. Focusing on cats first led to a boom in rabbit and rat numbers. Eliminating rabbits, rats and mice paved the way for predator removal and triggered a revival in vegetative habitat for other animal species. Access a couple of articles [here](#).

#### **Predator awareness can fade**

Native species can lose anti-predator traits when living in sanctuaries, making them less suitable for release outside of safe havens, according to work from WA (Natasha Harrison et.al) and observations from Kath Tuft (Arid Recovery, SA). See [here](#) for Kath's Linked-in Post, or [here](#) for the Harrison et.al research paper in Biological Conservation.

#### **Understanding mammal extinctions**

Combining historic data and ecological models is helping to understand and explain mammal extinction in Australia - and pose questions for future efforts to avoid more species becoming 'threatened'. For more information see the Journal of Biogeography, [here](#).

#### **Insect informers detect vertebrate pests**

An article in The Conversation reports that extracts from **blood-sucking insects can reveal the DNA of their hosts**; potentially being another form of detecting cryptic species. For more information, see [here](#).

#### **Genome partnership: Pests & weeds**

**CSIRO** is planning to generate genomic data for hundreds of pests and weeds and make it freely available. The data will be useful in things like gene-drive developments. For more information on the **Australian Pest Genome Partnership**, see [here](#).

[Back to Contents](#)

## **Feedback**

Any thoughts on this Newsletter, technical difficulties with links, things you'd like to see in future editions, or any matters to do with the Foundation - please [let us know](#).