

# Foundation for Rabbit-Free Australia

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**Abridged Version for Print**

## Foundation Matters

Updates and notices for Foundation members and partners.

### **AGM 2024: Notice of Meeting**

Our 2024 AGM will be held at the Adelaide Zoo, 2:00 pm (ACST), Thursday Nov 7th.

Please **register to attend** by October 30, either via our website or email us.  
Meeting papers will be sent to registered attendees prior to the meeting.

This AGM signals the end of 5-year terms for Chair Wayne Meyer and committee member Amy Iannella, and will unveil the Committee's efforts at succession planning. The meeting will be full of reflection on the past few years and ripe with expectations for the future. If you would like to nominate a member of the Foundation for the committee please complete and return the form, available via Contact Us by Oct 21.

Our **guest speaker**, delivering the Greg Mutze Oration, will be **Jack Gough**, Advocacy Director with [Invasive Species Council](#), speaking on 'Social licence for rabbit control'. Jack has been at the coal-face of debates such as the culling of feral horses in the alpine parks and has a strong history of policy development, law reform and conservation funding. The Invasive Species Council advocates for laws, policies and programs to keep Australian biodiversity safe from weeds, feral animals and other invaders.

### **National Rabbit Management Coordinator**

Some fantastic news - the **Australian government** (Department of Agriculture, Fisheries & Forestry) have contracted the **Centre for Invasive Species Solutions** (CISS) to appoint a National Rabbit Management Coordinator.

The role is something that **Rabbit-Free Australia** have championed, and we are delighted to be a co-investor in the program. It is time for a small celebration and thank-yous to all the supporters of the proposal, especially the other co-investors who have brought all the planning to a fruitful outcome.

The Coordinator will be dedicated to facilitating the wider application of recommended rabbit management practices across Australia. Recruitment will be underway very soon. Keep an eye out for advertisements if you, or someone you know, would be a good fit for the role.

## **AVPC 2024**

Rabbit-Free Australia was well represented at the recent **Australasian Vertebrates Pest Conference**, helping to put a spot-light on rabbits. There was a session dedicated to rabbit control (summarised below) and several talks on rabbit matters in other sessions.

The conference was a great opportunity to meet new people, share ideas and information, and hear the latest research and applications from around Australia and NZ. Meeting people from the various networks that we facilitate in person rather than via a computer screen was another major benefit.

## **RATs for rabbit viruses**

**Grant Hansman** (Griffith University, Qld) has reported some early success on the road to developing Rapid Antigen Tests for diseases of rabbits and hares, in a project supported by Rabbit-Free Australia.

The team have identified the parts of a hare calicivirus that latch onto hare's antigens during an infection. Being able to identify the binding site is a step toward producing copies of the site, which will enable a search for strain-specific antigens - a cornerstone to Rapid Antigen Tests. News of the research has been submitted to the Journal of Virology.

## **New project. Removing rabbits to restore ecosystems**

Managing rabbits can be challenging in conservation areas. The Foundation will help find answers by investing in a study of how the strategic removal of rabbits can restore ecosystems.

Managed by the University of Tasmania, but working in the Flinders Ranges of South Australia, the project will look at **fauna** and **plant community responses**. A PhD is being appointed for each theme. The work is also mentioned in '**Warren ripping for cat control**' in the [Rabbit Management Snippets](#) below.

## **Banjo strikes a chord**

A recent '**Contact us**' enquiry came from a student wanting information on rabbits, leading to a couple of email exchanges directing her to different parts of our website, and her response, '*I was inspired to do this topic because of a recent children's book written by Kristin Martin in collaboration with Rabbit-Free Australia.*'

Other feedback on 'Banjo Frog's Concert Spectacular', the first in a planned series of [Easter Bilby's Friends](#) books, has included:

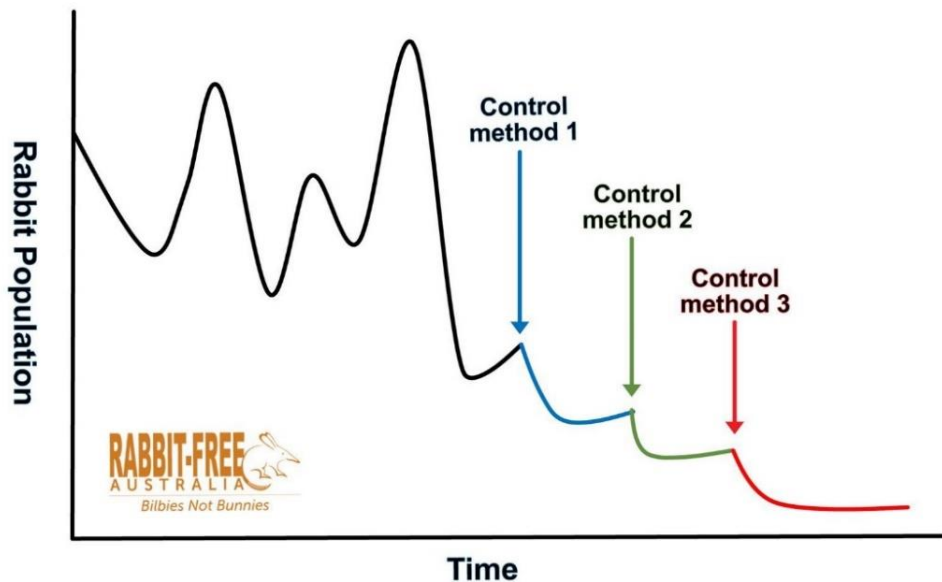
- *My son's favourite part was finding the easter eggs. He went back for a second look and I could hear him reading 'bonk bonk bonk' under his breath.*
- *I gave a copy to our Kindy. They're excited to read it with the kids who, each year have an excursion to plant habitat for the Southern Brown Bandicoot in the National Park, so it ties in PERFECTLY with their curriculum there!*

Meanwhile, a blog in The Conversation encourages scientists to team up with authors to create children's books about animals. Let's hope they're right and our investment in the Easter Bilby's Friends book series achieves the aims of educating and engaging a wider audience.

### Keys to Rabbit Control: Information sheet

Inspired by a '3 methods' graphic developed by rabbit expert and Foundation member, **Pat Taggart**, we've had a bit of a skunk works exercise with technical experts to produce a simple introduction to rabbit control. We hope the short document will be of use for people getting interested in rabbit control and help them understand the basic principles involved.

## The Aim of Integrated Rabbit Control



A **bait**, **rip**, **fumigate** sequence, followed by ongoing maintenance can be very effective and cost-efficient in temperate areas (Williams & Moore, 1995), but numerous options can be selected for individual circumstances.

After Pat Taggart, 2024

With support from CSIRO and other technical experts we are now developing a similar document on how to optimise the use of RHDV-K5.

### Australian Government Drought Plan

A draft Australian Government Drought Plan was recently available for comment. The opportunity was taken to submit our policy document calling for the inclusion of pest control, especially rabbit control, as a standard element in drought recovery programs.

Assistance for programs like warren ripping during drought can be very effective for years to come, tackling rabbits while they are vulnerable, aiding the well-being of landholders, and ensuring landscapes can rebound and continue to recover without harm from rabbits once a drought ends.

**Applications for funding** of long-term trials of drought resistant farming practices are now open through Round 2 of the Future Drought Fund.

### **Strategic Plan review**

The Foundation's **Five-Year Strategic Plan** will be up for review next year. To get the process underway members and key stakeholders are invited to nominate the activities and outcomes they would like to see as priorities for the Foundation. Please contact us to help set the course for the Foundation to follow.

### **Seamstresses Needed. Please help**

Are you, a family member or friend **handy with a needle and thread**? Then Rabbit-Free Australia needs your help.

The Foundation is preparing '**Banjo Frog Book Storytime Kits**' to be donated for use in public libraries around Australia. The kits will include a copy of the book for 'Storytime' reading to groups of children and their guardians, along with various engagement and education resources - including **felt puppets**.

If you are able to help **create the puppets**, the Foundation will gladly supply the materials needed. Please get in touch with our Executive Officer by email. The kits will help spread our messages, share some fun and promote the books to new audiences.



## Rabbit News & Views

Stories about and from Foundation members and partners.

### What are gene-drives?

Rabbit-Free Australia helped to kick-start research into the use of gene-drive technology for rabbit control at the University of Melbourne, led by Stephen Frankenberg. Researcher Ellen Cottingham has provided an easy to digest explanation of gene-drives; '**What are gene drives?**' was posted on **ABC NEWS**. It includes a simple video clip by Stephen and his niece, Jessica. Who knew a gene-drive story could be so charming?

Gene-drive technology holds prospect as a very humane form of rabbit control and one of the take-home messages from the Australasian Vertebrate Pest Conference was that advances in gene-drive technology are happening and happening quite quickly. It is time to give more thought to the many other aspects needed if the technology is to ever be applied in the field. With that in mind we are exploring options to make it a focus for the **Rabbit R&D Webinar** in **2025**.

### Odonata: Mt Rothwell Sanctuary case study

Odonata is an innovative organisation dedicated to the protection and restoration of native biodiversity through a network of sanctuaries and collaborations. Managing rabbits in a sanctuary can be challenging for conservation managers but Odonata have developed some clever ways to remove rabbits from an ever increasing area of priority sites.

They have kindly prepared a **video case study** of their rabbit control program at Mt Rothwell Sanctuary in Victoria. What happens when feral predators are removed from a sanctuary? How do sniffer dogs and trail cameras protect native animals? Find the answers and a whole lot more in the Rabbit Eradication at Odonata video, available on YouTube.

If you have a story to share, please get in touch. Thanks Odonata, this is a beauty.

### The Myxo Story

Revisit the story of how myxomatosis was nearly scrapped as a failure, as told by the late Peter Kerr in a 2020 **ABC NEWS** story. Over 70 years after its release outbreaks of myxomatosis still occur. Rabbits that survive an infection can be left with a compromised immune system, making them more susceptible to calici virus.

With assistance from Rabbit-Free Australia, **Kandarp Patel (University of Adelaide)** is investigating the strains of myxo that are now in circulation. If you find a rabbit that has died of myxo (as typified by ulcerous lesions on the face) please help the research by getting a tissue sample to Kandarp. You can contact him directly (**email**) or via the [CSIRO laboratories](#) that share samples with the project. For information on the project, see **Current Research**, on our website.

## Monitoring RHDV

Rabbit-Free Australia members **David Peacock et.al.** have published an article on their experiences and learnings about monitoring RHDV. Their paper highlights the value of having passive (e.g. citizen science) and active monitoring (e.g. shot samples) and compares a range of techniques including monitoring flies, carcass searches and capture-recapture.

It is a reminder of the importance of investing in ongoing surveillance and will be informative to wildlife disease monitoring on all continents.

## Bellarine Landcare Group

The Bellarine Landcare Group in Victoria have recently joined the Foundation with a Group (5) membership. They have a lively Rabbit Action Group and we've shared several of their 'products' in the past - including a now-commercialised home-made **warren-smoker** (see Smoker Nuggets in [Rabbit Management Snippets](#) below) and a well-laid out **calendar for controls**. They have also produced a **brochure aimed at peri-urban communities**.

The Group aspires to have a rabbit-free Bellarine Peninsula and are part of a **Regional Rabbit Population Control Project**. We welcome them to the Foundation

## It starts with rabbit removal

**Wild Deserts** are reclaiming areas of **Sturt National Park** for native species that have been locally extinct for over 100 years. The process starts with rabbit removal, followed by predator removal and the early reintroduction of 'ecosystem engineers' like bilbies.

Bilbies are 'ecosystem engineers', helping to revive landscapes. Image: ABC News - Wild Deserts



## Australian Animal Welfare Strategy

Earlier this year the Foundation made a submission to the review of the Australian Animal Welfare Strategy. This is an early step in a 3 year program. The website includes a '**Subscribe**' button to receive updates as the review progresses.

A Summary of feedback notes several challenges to the review, including:

- increased **polarisation** of views between stakeholders,
- **inconsistencies** between jurisdictions, and
- **misalignment** between community and production expectations.

## NSW Review: Invasive species management

The Preliminary Report of a review into invasive species management in NSW presents a very comprehensive overview of the factors affecting invasive species management. While focused on NSW it is bound to contain insights of interest to all jurisdictions. Chapter headings include:

- Prioritising strategic planning
- Supporting regional coordination
- Strengthening compliance
- Communicating risks and impacts
- Integrating knowledge and oversight

## Snippets

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

### Rabbit Management

#### Warren smoker nuggets

A **new tool** is now available to identify warren openings prior to fumigation. Commercialising an innovation from the **Bellarine Landcare Group**, **ACTA** have produced ignitable nuggets to generate smoke that wafts through a warren exposing entrances as it departs.

#### Warren ripping for cat control

Research from the Flinders Ranges has been in the news with warren ripping cited as an important contributor to feral cat control.

#### VRAN website update

VRAN have updated their website with a new look and heaps of info. Check it out at [vran.com.au](http://vran.com.au).

## Viruses & Genetics

### Rabbit disease research

A special edition of the **Journal of Veterinary Diagnostic Investigation** focuses on diseases of rabbits and other lagomorphs. The wide range of papers cover everything from parasites to viruses, including RHDV.

### Rabbit Biocontrol Pipeline Strategy

It is good to see **Australian Wool Innovation** promoting awareness of rabbits and the Rabbit Biocontrol Pipeline Strategy in a recent edition of their growers magazine, **Beyond the Bale**.

### Gene-Drives. What people think

As the **NZ government** considers permitting gene-drive technology outside of labs and introducing a gene tech regulator, social researchers have highlighted that:

- Acceptance of a problem was necessary before supporting gene technology to solve it, with more support for gene tech to manage weeds than for pest animals.
- Scientists and policy makers have a role in educating the public - but not towards a predetermined outcome. Engaging communities in decision making will be necessary for responsible innovation to occur.

For more information, see **The Conversation** report. For information about the **Australian Office of the Gene Technology Regulator**, see [ogtr.gov.au](http://ogtr.gov.au).

### Farmed fur animals harbour viruses

A Chinese-led team of researchers sequenced genetic material from animals such as mink, **rabbits**, foxes and raccoons that are farmed for their fur and died of disease. From 461 animals they found 125 viruses, including 36 new ones. 39 were considered to pose a 'high risk' of jumping across species, including to humans.

## Biodiversity

### National Recovery Plan: Malleefowl

The 2024 National Recovery Plan for the Malleefowl has been released and is available online.

Strategy 3 in the Plan is to *Manage impacts of herbivore grazing and habitat destruction by feral animals*. Required actions include management to keep feral pests below threshold levels (**<1 rabbit/Ha**) to enhance regeneration of malleefowl habit. It notes that ripping is the preferred control method, but suggests fumigation for culturally sensitive areas.



## **Drooping Sheoak Recovery Plan: EP**

A plan to enhance and restore drooping sheoak grassy woodlands on **Eyre Peninsula** has been launched by the local Landscape Board with funding from the Natural Heritage Trust. It will include managing the grazing pressure from livestock, kangaroos, rabbits, goats and deer.

## **Virtual Glossie Black Forum**

A national, virtual forum showcasing recent science, conservation planning and citizen science initiatives involving glossie black cockatoos will be held on Nov 19-20, 2024. Glossies are one of the species in the 'Banjo Frog' children's book, telling how **rabbits** eat the sheoaks which glossies rely on for food.

## **Technology**

### **Trail cameras: How to**

For simple tips on how to use trail cameras, checkout the clip from **Predator Free NZ**, on YouTube.

### **AI cameras control pest traps**

Trials are underway in New Zealand using AI and cameras to differentiate pests from native wildlife, and only open traps to the pests.

### **Baiting by drone**

**Predator Free NZ** has provided a story about [Envico Technologies](#) using heavy-lift drones to bait for rats and stoats, and to drop 'seed pods' - a mix of seeds, water, clay and compost - to aid revegetation. It's interesting to ponder applications for rabbit control and any regulatory or practical challenges that could arise.

## **Rangeland Monitoring: Grazing impacts**

A couple of recent papers have reported changes in rangeland condition following changes in livestock management.

- One reports a remote sensing application to assess changes in vegetation cover following the removal of livestock.
- Another used Landsat imagery to monitor the differences in rangeland groundcover between different grazing management regimes. One of the findings was that land units varied in their response to the same changes in grazing pressure.

Could approaches like these work for assessing the **landscape benefits of rabbit control**?

## **Biosensing - using smell for pest detection**

Researchers in New Zealand aim to detect different animals by their smell - volatile organic compounds emitted from glands etc - for real-time tracking in the wild.

## Other Pests

### Feral cat diets

A recent analysis cat gut contents and comparison to prey availability in an arid environment has confirmed that feral cats prey extensively on **rabbits** and also preferentially select medium sized rodents, snakes and ground-nesting birds. Species that 'froze' in response to threats were less preyed upon than species that 'fled'.

### Fox & Cat control

For information on how to control feral cats and foxes, see the National Management Coordination website.

### Shooting Peri-urban Deer: Lessons for rabbit control

A paper in Biological Invasions provides some interesting observations about shooting vertebrate pests in peri-urban areas.

- Thermal vision equipment was used to detect deer. Shooters used .223 rifles with 55 grain soft point bullets.
- Shooting was in accord with a safety plan for each site.
- Engaging local residents was a key to a successful campaign.
- Community perceptions of deer abundance or impacts was 'context-dependent'.
- Proactive surveys will provide more robust information than does monitoring resident complaints.

## Opportunities

### Leadership Program

The **Peter Cullen Trust** is inviting applications to their Leadership Program, aimed at future leaders of how Australia manages waterways and natural environments. The program offers participants the opportunity to enhance their leadership skills and ability to affect change. Applications close Nov 17, 2024.

### Kangaroo Management PhDs

Two PhD opportunities are available through ANU to examine kangaroo populations, management practices, and their impact on biodiversity and rangeland ecosystems. The projects aim to improve understanding and inform sustainable solutions for kangaroo management. Expressions of interest are open until **Oct 10, 2024**.