

ANIMAL PEST CONTROL

ANIMAL PEST

Rabbit Control in Urban Areas

Introduction

The European feral rabbit, *Oryctolagus cuniculus* was first introduced into New Zealand from England, pre-1830's for sport, food and fur. Further introductions took place in the 1840's and 1850's and by the 1890's rabbits had reached pest proportions in many areas. Population levels are now generally low.

Feral rabbits

The European rabbit is usually grey/brown in colour with a white belly and white under its tail. However, black, ginger and other colour varieties sometimes occur. In New Zealand the average weight of a wild rabbit is 1.5kg with the bucks (males) being slightly larger than the does (females).

Rabbits can breed throughout the year, although their main breeding season is from late winter to early summer. They can breed prolifically with one doe capable of producing 45 to 50 young per year.

The mortality rate of young rabbits is very high. Out of every 100 rabbits born, it is probable that only 10 survive to 6 months of age with only 1 or 2 reaching their life expectancy of 3 years of age.

Pet rabbits

Escaped or released pet rabbits are just as capable of damaging lawns and gardens as feral rabbits. Pet or domestic rabbits come in an assortment of colours and some varieties can grow quite large. These rabbits must be kept caged at all times; *it is illegal to release them.*

If you have a domestic rabbit damaging your lawns and gardens they can sometimes be easily caught and given to the SPCA.



Feral rabbits

Damage caused by rabbits

Rabbit burrows are probably the most obvious form of damage noticeable. However, these are not always present or may be concealed under buildings or other cover.

Rabbits will damage newly cultivated lawns by scratching the loose soil or eating new growth. In vegetable gardens, young seedlings may be completely eaten while the tops of older plants may be browsed. Freshly turned soil of seed beds will commonly be scratched.

Small trees and shrubs may have the bark of their trunks and lower branches bitten (trees may be killed by ring-barking in severe cases) and their root systems exposed as a result of rabbits scratching around their bases.

Rabbit browsing and scratching can also severely damage flower gardens.

Rabbit signs

Rabbits are generally nocturnal, and are not usually seen in the gardens during the day. Damage, of the type mentioned above, plus rabbit droppings will indicate that rabbits are present.

Rabbits leave droppings in small heaps or scattered throughout their feeding areas. Droppings are generally dark in colour, oval-shaped and approximately 8 to 10 mm in length.



Oval shaped rabbit droppings

Scratchings can also indicate the presence of rabbits, but birds and other animals will also scratch loose soil in gardens, so droppings are more reliable.



Rabbit scratchings

Alternatively, contact your Regional Council Biosecurity Animal Pest Officer who will verify whether rabbits are present or not.

Responsibility for control

Property owners receive most benefit from rabbit control. Therefore, they are responsible for the control of rabbits on their land.

Control options

For reasons of human and domestic pet safety, many of the traditional techniques of rabbit control cannot be used in urban areas.

However, householders still have several options available to them to either control rabbits or to minimise damage caused by them. These include:

- Poisoning with Pindone Rabbit Pellets
- Fumigation (if rabbits are burrowing)
- Exclusion fencing
- Use of repellents
- Habitat manipulation
- Trapping
- Commercial Pest Controllers

Using Pindone rabbit pellets

Pindone is a first-generation, anticoagulant poison that was originally developed for rodent control. Rabbits are particularly susceptible to Pindone, while non-target species such as cats and dogs are 5 to 6 times more resistant and humans are 100 times more resistant. This makes Pindone, when used correctly, a safe poison to use in the urban environment.

For further information see the Environment Topic *“Rabbit Control Using Pindone Rabbit Pellets”* available from Hawke’s Bay Regional Council.

Fumigation

Contrary to popular belief, rabbits do not always live in burrows, they can be quite happy living under buildings or in patches of heavy cover. However, if you happen to see rabbits using a burrow they can be controlled by fumigation.

For further information see the Environment Topic *“Use of Fumigants to Control Rabbits”* available from Hawke’s Bay Regional Council.

Exclusion fencing

Gardens and specific crops can be protected by preventing rabbits from gaining access to them. This is usually achieved by fencing. To be effective, a rabbit-proof fence should be at least 80cm in height and made from galvanised wire netting with a maximum mesh size of 3cm. As rabbits are capable of digging under fences, the bottom of the netting should be

buried 20cm into the ground or turned out along the top of the ground in the direction that the rabbits will attempt to enter. Gates through the fence must be close fitting, preferably with a concrete sill under them to prevent rabbits from burrowing underneath.

Individual shrubs and trees can be protected by using rabbit netting cylinders, plastic sheaths or steel guards.

Electric fencing can also prevent rabbits from damaging crops and gardens.

Use of repellents

Repellent preparations are designed to render plants unpalatable and unattractive to browsing rabbits. Repellents are generally applied as foliar sprays, which have to be reapplied periodically to treat new growth occurring within browsing range (40cm - 50cm above ground level). Spray-on repellent solutions should not be applied to the point of run-off as with other garden sprays.

For further information see the Environment Topic *"Use of Repellents for Animal Pest Control"* available from Hawke's Bay Regional Council.

The following methods can also be considered:

- Spray the lower parts of the trees in spring with a strong lime sulphur wash.
- A strong solution of Jeyes fluid will give temporary protection if sprayed evenly around plants.
- Sprinkle the garden with naphthalene moth balls or blood and bone fertiliser.

Habitat manipulation

Rabbits will generally only inhabit suitable territory. Habitat changes which make territory less desirable to a rabbit population will lead to reductions in the numbers of rabbits present in that territory. This is termed 'habitat manipulation' and it has a more permanent impact on rabbit numbers than control methods such as poisoning.

Unfortunately, gardens and lawns with short grass, variety of foods and cover in the form of garden sheds, wood piles, dense vegetation etc to live under, can offer rabbits a very good habitat.

Remove any piles of wood or rubbish that may be in the garden and ensure that any gaps under buildings and sheds are blocked to prevent rabbits from gaining access. The low pruning of shrubs and hedges and the removal of other vegetation that offer rabbits protection from the weather and predators will make your garden less suitable to rabbits.

Maximising lawn areas will also make your garden less desirable to rabbits. The presence of a good hunting cat in your garden will keep your rabbits numbers to a minimum but will probably have a detrimental impact on any nesting birds in the garden area.

Trapping

Using traps and snares can be effective in reducing rabbit numbers in gardens. However, this method can be time consuming. It also requires knowledge of correct trap or snare placement to prevent non-target captures and to be successful. Trapping is not recommended unless you already have some experience in rabbit-trapping techniques.

Before considering trapping as a control option, check with your local District Council to ensure that the use of traps or snares is allowed under local by-laws.

For further information on the use of traps and snares for rabbit control, contact your your Regional Council Biosecurity Animal Pest Officer.

Commercial pest controllers

If you have concerns about using any of the above techniques to control your nuisance rabbits, contact your Regional Council Biosecurity Animal Pest Officer who will recommend a suitable pest control Contractor.

Advice

Regional Council Biosecurity Animal Pest Officers are available to provide information and advice on rabbit control and correct use of poisons and traps.

Acknowledgements

Photos and information supplied by Environment Bay of Plenty.

For further information

For further information on animal pests or the Regional Pest Management Strategy, please contact the Biosecurity Animal Pest Officers at the Hawke's Bay Regional Council.

Wairoa	06 838 8527
Napier	06 835 9200
Waipukurau	06 858 8636
TOLL FREE	0800 108 838

www.hbrc.govt.nz