



# History of the European wild rabbit in Australia



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## Introduction and Establishment

Domestic rabbits were first introduced into Australia with the first fleet. They were imported on many subsequent occasions but did not become feral except in Tasmania. It was after Thomas Austin brought twenty four wild rabbits from England in 1859 and released them on his property in southern Victoria that the rabbit became established on the mainland (Rolls,19). There may have been other unpublicised releases in Victoria and South Australia at the same time, but Austin received the credit or rather, the blame for the introduction of the rabbit to the mainland.

The establishment of the rabbit was initially regarded as a great success for the sporting gentleman. In 1866, only 7 years after its introduction, 14,253 rabbits were shot for sport alone on Austin's property (Rolls, 28). This was Australia's first intimation at the amazing reproductive capability of the rabbit from which the saying "Breeding like rabbits" would work its way into the Australian lexicon.

"Sometime in the 1850's a man was charged at the Colac (Victoria) Police Court with having shot a rabbit, the property of John Robertson of Glen Alvie. He was fined 10 pounds. A few years later, Robertsons son spent 5000 pounds a year in an attempt to control rabbits" (pg 21 Rolls). By 1869 it was estimated that 2,033,000 rabbits had been destroyed on his property and that they were as thick as ever (pg 35 Rolls). This illustrates beautifully what happened so often in different parts of Australia. Domestic rabbits were initially highly prized and many attempts were made to establish them, until the inevitable invasion of the wild rabbit only a few years later. To control the rabbit numbers once the rabbit had invaded land was almost impossible.

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## The Grey Blanket



### The spread of the rabbit across Australia

The rabbit spread from Austin's property and from other release points in both Victoria and South Australia. (see map) The rabbit took 15 years to reach the NSW border, another 15 years to reach Queensland and another 10 to reach Western Australia and the Northern Territory. Numbers were such that the movement of rabbits across the landscape was referred to as "a grey blanket". Australia witnessed the fastest rate of spread of any colonising mammal anywhere in the world. (Stodart & Parer)

The rabbit did not spread naturally across Australia. Its' social structure is such that only at the point of a population collapse at the brink of starvation will the young bucks and subordinate does leave to establish themselves elsewhere. Floods, fire and other such extreme events such as hunting pressure will also cause an exodus of rabbits. Spreading across Australia may have taken a lot longer if it weren't for the sportsmen and trappers who had an incentive to assist the spread of the rabbit to ensure their future prosperity.

The English gentlemen felt quite at content being able to shoot as they did 'back home'. They could also congratulate themselves as accomplished shooters, shooting at times 1,200 in 3 1/2 hours, a figure unheard of in England, but so too were the figures for the number of rabbits in the landscape. Rabbits

were also spread by those whose pastime was game shooting. These Gentlemen took rabbits from shooting farms to establish them in their own regions and so the rabbit was transported around the country as game for sporting purposes. "As the rabbits proliferated in numbers, the farmers began to bitterly complain, the sportsmen who were delighted, regarded the farmers as universal spoilers of gentlemen's sport" (pg 28, Rolls).

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## Past Control



Throughout Australia, shooters and trappers were being hired as rabbits devastated crops and reduced the carrying capacity of the land dramatically. The rabbitier did not attempt to eradicate the rabbit as that would be working oneself out of a job. The rabbitiers were known to release rabbits whilst travelling to ensure work in that area. In protest to the NSW Minister for Lands 1888 decision to stop subsidising farmers to pay bounties, the rabbitiers simply allowed the rabbit to procreate by not killing the young and by

releasing trapped pregnant does. It was also hypothesised that the only reason that there were never plagues in Queensland was that there wasn't a meat or pelt industry.

Many fences were erected to control the spread of the rabbits, yet these were mostly unsuccessful. Early fences were destroyed by wombats, rabbits, kangaroos, buried by sand drifts and because of the vast lengths of the fences, they were poorly maintained. Often fences built to stop rabbits were not completed until after the rabbit front had passed, such as the Queensland/NSW border fence and various fences in Western Australia. Rabbits were sometimes stopped by fences, but in plague proportions, there were so many rabbits piled up by the fences, that the rabbits acted as a ladder for others that simply walked over the fence. Rabbits also will climb fences and they have been known to climb trees up to five meters.

The States response was often too slow and inefficient. South Australia produced the first legislation in Australia concerning the rabbit which protected it during spring breeding and considered a valuable resource. Shortly after this legislation, South Australia was also the first state to legislate a Rabbit Destruction Act in 1875 (Williams,103). Other States legislated against rabbits with varying degrees of success.

There were concerns about the effectiveness of early programs. A correspondent to The Observer in 1886 described the governments policies for this control of the rabbit in South Australia as `trying to stop the tide with a pitchfork' and almost all attempts rabbit control before myxomatosis could be described in

similar terms. Methods were indiscriminate and often resulted in substantial deaths of native wildlife and considerable risk to people (Williams, 104).

The rabbit may have been contained by natural boundaries such as rivers and thick forest vegetation but the rabbit spread over and through these barriers was assisted by Sportsman and Rabbiters whose interest lay in its spread. The Squatters assisted the invasion of their own lands by clearing the very vegetation that the rabbit would not penetrate and leaving the fallen trees as rabbit harbour.



[Present distribution of rabbits in Australia](#)

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## Traditional Control Techniques

Many techniques of rabbit control have been used in attempts to lower the rabbit population eg; [fencing](#), [warren ripping](#), [warren fumigation](#) and 1080 poisoning. All of these techniques are expensive, time consuming, labour intensive and often have to be repeated over consecutive years to achieve low populations yet they are necessary if any attempt is to be made at rabbit control. Although historical attempts at rabbit proof fences were largely unsuccessful, netted fences can be highly effective if maintained and control measures are taken within the boundary.

All of the traditional techniques are effective if performed properly and consistently. The key word is "consistently" and most farmers only respond with control techniques when a problem is perceived. This is not a very effective or cost effective way of controlling rabbits. In the rangelands, where the rabbit is periodically most abundant, traditional techniques are not regarded as being cost effective (Williams, 1993).

Groups of Farmers that establish a regional rabbit control strategy are more likely to meet with success than a lone farmer. Such a strategy will lower rabbit numbers over a district and not merely push them over the fence. Several [Landcare](#) groups have received subsidies towards hiring tractors and other equipment, making a necessary job, quicker, easier and less expensive.

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