



Henry Foster

Henry Foster (pictured with an old baitlayer) has been a generous sponsor of Rabbit-Free Australia for many years.

We are grateful for his contribution to rabbit research and awareness raising, and we invited him to reflect on his experiences with rabbits in Tasmania over a long period of time.

This is his story from our April 2020 Newsletter

I live on a property southwest of Campbell Town (Tas), which has grown from the original two grants of 500 acres each to my ancestors in 1823 to be now 7770 ha, about 5000 ha being the Macquarie Tier.

Growing up in Hobart I would accompany my father on his visits here or stay for school holidays with my grandparents and two maiden aunts. On these visits I would be handed a few packets of ammo and a .22 single shot Winchester rifle and told to go and shoot rabbits. Well the rabbits were so thick you could hardly miss, but I did upset the two “rabbiters” who were employed because I frightened the rabbits and them as well. My father had little interest in farming but was forced take an interest in rabbits because of the tremendous damage they did to the property that he part owned.

My father was a member of the Tasmanian State Committee of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research [CSIR] and later chairman before and after the change to CSIRO and before the abolition of state committees. He told me of the many debates and discussion the members had about myxomatosis. Myxo had been brought to Australia in about 1929 but after 20 years of research and trials it had not been successfully introduced to control rabbits; some thought continued research was a waste of time, money and effort. However people with rural interest prevailed and support for research into myxomatosis continued. Finally in the early 1950s myxo took off and the rabbit population in Tasmania declined dramatically. I will never forget walking around dispatching blind rabbits.

While rabbits were a curse to farmers they did serve a useful purpose, supplying meat (underground mutton) for people and fur for felt hats which every man wore. During World War II sheep and beef meat were rationed and so there was a thriving trade in rabbits. In Hobart the “Rabbitto” plied the streets in his cart with racks of fresh rabbits.

His bell announced his whereabouts and with money from my mother we would hasten to the bell for a pair of rabbits. But first the rabbit needed skinning which the Rabbitto did in the blink of your eye, the skin on the wire frame and a carcass in your hand. It was to be fricassee rabbit for dinner that night, or occasionally roast rabbit. But before dinner it was bath time for the younger children and as mother pulled their clothes off she would exclaim: "skin a rabbit!". With the introduction of myxomatosis rabbits went off the menu.

In the late 1940s I went on my first and only rabbit shoot. Nigel, head salesman at Cuthbertson's Shoe Shop, invited me to go rabbit shooting one Saturday. Up at about 4.30am and with my lunch and drink I was dropped off and joined the shooting party of a dozen or more men. The drive to the farming property seemed long and I had no idea where we were, but there were masses of rabbits where we entered the farm. On arrival the plan was discussed and as dawn broke we set off in line, some with rifles and some with shotguns. I walked a few yards behind Nigel and at one stage tried my luck with his rifle, but it was actually a lucky day for some rabbits because I never hit any. They were a very disciplined group of shooters, having made many of these expeditions before so I had no fears for my safety. By late morning everyone had had enough shooting – it had been a very successful morning with hundreds of rabbits killed, some of which we kept for eating and pet food.

When I was at school in the 1940s and early 50s, the finals of school sporting competitions were held alternately in Hobart and Launceston. The Tasmanian Railways put on a special return train to which ever city the games were held in. Apart from fly ash in my eyes and the chaotic scramble for a pie and drink at the Parattah Station stop, I was fascinated by the number of rabbits along the train track. The railway reserve was quite wide with gorse and briers making a wonderful sanctuary for rabbits. Their number was enormous and they were well conditioned to trains passing as they seldom moved away, so you had a very close look at rabbits. No one seemed responsible for their control.

I took over the farm management in 1965, at a time when there were still Vermin Inspectors. To justify their jobs they would issue orders to conduct a 1080 campaign on large areas of the property. We didn't kill many rabbits but we had quite an impact on the native animals. Vermin Inspector positions were eventually abolished and farmers left to their own devices to control rabbits. Meantime other myxoma strains were released and later the calici virus and even fleas, all of which had an effect depending season and environment. With no further 1080 poisoning the native animal populations increased dramatically including the Tasmanian Devil that very successfully cleaned out rabbits from warrens and burrows.

On our property rabbit numbers are now very low and for some years we have not taken any action to control them – we sometimes see them around the settlement areas, especially my garden and a few other places. They also live in parts of Campbell Town itself. Eradicating them from populated urban areas is probably difficult and a matter that should be investigated.

As you can understand I still have an interest in rabbits – it would be good if they could be eradicated as on Macquarie Island, but probably the best we can hope for is very good control of their population.

Henry Foster, 2020
Compiled by Bruce Munday.