

FOXES ON THE RUN

One morning, early in April, Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) officers began collecting dead foxes and cats after the first night of a three-night baiting program to determine the density of the feral predator population on Peron Peninsula.

Little did they know that by mid-afternoon on the third day they would have evidence that the fox density on Peron Peninsula was twice that known anywhere else in the State.

Fox-baiting at Peron Peninsula is part of Project Eden

(see *LANDSCOPE*, Autumn 1995), a program to eradicate feral animals from the peninsula and reintroduce native animals.

Over a three-night period, 146 foxes and three cats were killed, which project officer Ray Smith said was an extraordinarily high density of foxes.

"Seventy-nine foxes died the first night, with 37 and 30 on the following two nights, respectively," Ray said.

"The unusually high density of foxes could probably be attributed to the large numbers of rabbits, on which foxes prey."

With the initial density trials completed, aerial baiting with 1080 poison baits began. About 10 000 baits were dropped on an area covering the entire peninsula, with bait-free buffers being retained around Denham township, the Monkey Mia facilities and main camping areas to protect family pets from inadvertently picking up a bait.

Before the aerial baiting began, signs were erected to let people know which areas were being baited. Brochures were mailed to all homes and businesses in the area to inform residents and visitors about the project and details of the baiting program. Brochures are still available at all local tourist resorts, caravan parks, information offices and the CALM office in Denham.

Some four weeks after aerial baiting began, the density survey was repeated. This time no foxes were killed.

Extensive track inspections and spotlight surveys by the Special Air Services Regiment, have confirmed that foxes have been almost eradicated in the baited zone, with only one fox being sighted.

Some foxes still persist in the bait exclusion zones, although their numbers have been reduced. Follow-up baiting is planned for areas next to the zones to help stop those remaining foxes from reinvading the nearby Francois Peron National Park.

As expected, the fox baiting has had little impact on feral cats, which are

widespread on the peninsula, but in relatively low numbers. However, a broad area baiting of the peninsula, planned for September, will use a special cat bait developed by CALM scientists, and it is expected that this will reduce the number of cats as well as further reduce the number of remaining foxes.

Research by CALM and other agencies has shown that, when fox and feral cat numbers are controlled, populations of some native animals increase dramatically. Species that may have become extinct locally may be reintroduced once feral predator numbers have been reduced.

Some species that are now extinct on Peron Peninsula still survive on islands such as Bernier and Dorre, near Shark Bay; they include the boodie, rufous hare-wallaby, western-barred bandicoot and the Shark Bay mouse.

Other species that once inhabited the region are the chuditch, woylie, red-tailed phascogale, stick-nest rat and the mulgara (a marsupial carnivore).

Later this year, a fence will be erected across the three-kilometre-wide Taillefer Isthmus, just south of Shell Beach, as a further barrier to minimise reinvasion by foxes, cats, goats and rabbits. The fence design will enable vehicles on the main road to pass without stopping, but feral animals will not be able to get through at that point.

Project Eden is creating interest across Australia. Scientists from the Australian Nature Conservation Agency (ANCA), who are planning a similar but smaller-scale project on the east coast, spent several days with CALM scientists to gain an insight into the fox and feral cat control techniques CALM employs.

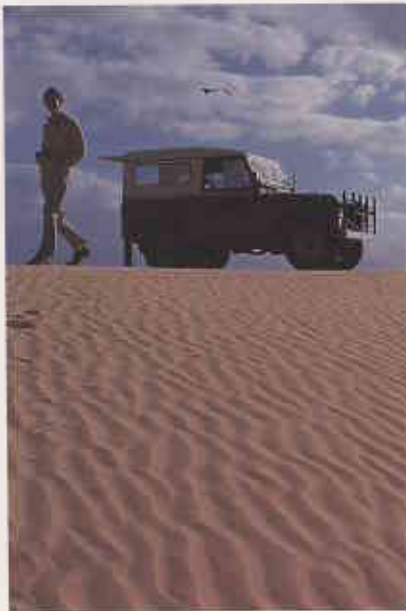


Above left: *Before aerial baiting began, Peron Peninsula had a very high fox density.*
Photo - Ray Smith

Left: *Fewer fox tracks indicate a successful baiting program.*
Photo - Babs & Bert Wells/CALM

LANDSCOPE

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Cooperation between 4WD clubs and CALM is helping to protect WA's special recreation spots through a program of education. See 'Go Lightly' on page 17.



The noisy scrub-bird is one species that is responding well to its recovery plan. 'Recovering from the Brink' (page 10) discusses how such plans are drawn up.



Mt Augustus is the biggest rock in the world; yet few people know it exists. Find out more about this natural wonder on page 28.



There is a great deal written and talked about our forests. But what are the facts? 'Looking Beyond the Obvious' (page 22) dispels some of the myths.



Specially developed computer software is helping speed the identification of plant species in 'The Smart Collection' (page 49).

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COVER

The rainbow bee-eater is a common bird found throughout most parts of the State, including Mt Augustus National Park.

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