

## PRACTICALITIES

## CAN POISON PEAS REALLY CONTROL RABBITS? - A CALL FOR READERS' COMMENTS

Mike Griffiths and Robert Boase

Several articles in Western Wildlife over the years have covered the subject of our native peas and their role in the local bush and in revegetation. One group of native peas, the poison peas (*Gastrolobium* spp.) is well known for their toxicity to non-native animals, in particular sheep and cattle. For this reason they invariably cause farmers and graziers to shudder at the mere thought of them. But the active ingredient of poison peas '1080' poison (albeit manufactured artificially) is also extremely important in the control of another exotic species of mammal in WA – the red fox.

The dramatic effects of the toxins produced by the leaves, flowers and seeds of our poison peas on exotic animal species have long been recognised by farmers and ecologists, but few, if any, have written about the effects of rabbits grazing on the plants. However, the highly respected botanist, historian, artist and writer Rica Erickson, who lived for many years in the Victoria Plains district of WA, made the following observation in 1965 in her classic book "Orchids of the West":

*"There is a forgotten piece of land in this district of Bolgart, with timbered rocky gullies, fenced out from the neighbouring farms as worthless and even dangerous to stock because it is so infested with poison plants. Though rabbits are a constant menace of these farms, and though the fence around the wasteland is not rabbit-proof, there is little sign of the pest in that naturally protected wildlife reserve. It would be a curious piece of irony if we should sow the seeds of poison plants in reserves as the simplest method of protecting them from unwanted grazing"\**

Mrs Erickson is famous for her knowledge of the WA bush, based on years of close observation. Her thoughts on the possibility of poison peas controlling rabbits seem to be supported by at least two farmers who

have reported to us that the only bush remnants on their properties without rabbits are those that contain large patches of poison peas (typically box poison). It is also supported by one of the authors (RB) who remembers stuffing box poison (*G. parviflorum*) down active rabbit warrens on the family farm in the Dowerin-Goomalling district in the 1950s and observed no further activity for several months afterwards. Could 'smart' revegetation and fencing, incorporating stands of poison pea (and perhaps double fencing to ensure protection of livestock) be used in future bush protection projects as a long-term, inexpensive way to control rabbits?

We would be very grateful to hear from any Western Wildlife readers who may have observed the effects of poison bushes on rabbit populations on their own properties, or may have other comments on the subject, with view to writing a later follow-up article to include any feedback. We would also welcome hearing from anyone who is interested in being involved in rabbit control trials using *Gastrolobium*.

\*Page 28, "Orchids of the West" (2nd Edn) by Rica Erickson. Paterson Brokensha; Perth, 1965.



York road poison, *G. calycinum*

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