# New technology to target feral cats in the south-west forests

*By Brian Chambers and Adrian Wayne*

Across millions of hectares of Australia's forests and woodlands, areas that were once teeming with native fauna are now largely devoid of movement. The clearing of huge swathes of land for agriculture and the influence of introduced herbivores such as rabbits dramatically changed the landscape, making it less hospitable to the native species that called these areas home for millennia.

Following the introduction of rabbits came foxes and feral cats. These highly efficient predators drove many populations of native mammals that survived in the remaining uncleared areas of habitat to extinction. To this day, predation by feral cats and foxes remains one of the major threats to our native mammals.

*A Felixer grooming trap. These traps are a new technology which use range-finding sensors to recognise cats and foxes, and spray only these target animals with a gel containing the 1080 toxin. Feral cats will groom themselves, licking the gel off their fur and consume a lethal dose of poison. Photo – DBCA.*

The Upper Warren region of south-west Western Australia is an important refuge for native mammals. Ten particularly vulnerable species of native mammals including numbats, woylies and western ringtail possums have persisted in this area, aided by landscape scale fox control through the *Western Shield* program run by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions (DBCA). However, seven of these 10 species have suffered significant declines since the turn of the century with predation by feral cats implicated as a contributing factor. The South West Catchments Council is working with DBCA and the Blackwood Basin Group to test the ability of Felixer™ grooming traps to control feral cats across large areas of the forest to protect these vulnerable native species.

Felixer grooming traps use range-finding sensors to distinguish target cats and foxes from non-target wildlife and humans, and spray targets with a gel containing the 1080 toxin. Feral cats are fastidious groomers and will lick the gel off their fur, consuming a lethal dose of poison as they do. Felixer grooming traps have the potential to bolster feral cat control efforts that have previously relied on baiting, which is challenging and at times ineffective due to the preference of cats to take live prey.

Our first trial, which deployed eight Felixer traps over 14,000ha of forest for eight weeks, reduced feral cat activity by up to 24% when compared to a site without Felixer traps, which recorded an increase of 25% in feral cat activity over the same period.

*Captured on camera: a feral cat with a woylie in its mouth. Predation by feral cats is a major threat to our native mammals and control has been challenging due to the preference of cats to take live prey over baits. Photo – South West Catchments Council.*

This reduction in activity at sites where traps were deployed was maintained for five months after the traps were removed. Our project is continuing to improve the efficacy of the traps by targeting their deployment locations based on camera trapping data and moving the traps part way through deployment if required.

Felixer grooming traps have the potential to be a useful tool alongside other management techniques to help conserve our vulnerable native fauna. This research, funded through the Australian Government's National Landcare Program, will help us learn how to use them most effectively so that we can help the recovery of our native species.

## Contact

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