

# Rabbit

*Oryctolagus cuniculus*

## What does it look like?

Rabbits are usually grey-brown in colour, with other colour varieties occasionally occurring in the wild. They may live in communal warrens (underground tunnels with multiple entrances) or above-ground where sufficient cover exists. Rabbits prefer habitats with free draining soils and open grassland with adjacent taller vegetation, as well as scrub for cover.

Females may be pregnant for 70% of a year and can produce a total of 20 – 50 young each. They are also capable of adjusting litter sizes to available food supply, allowing their populations to rebound quickly following control pressures. Some wild rabbits may live up to seven years but life spans are generally much shorter (on average, 2-3 years).



## Why is it a problem?

Rabbits breed rapidly and populations can recover quickly after being reduced by disease, control pressures or environmental changes. They are a significant agricultural and ecological pest, eating a variety of plant matter including both native and exotic grasses, seedlings of trees and crops. Rabbits compete directly with stock for grazing and can sour pasture by eating out the most palatable species of grass - contributing to the increase of unpalatable weed species. This can be a serious problem for native plant regeneration and farm or lifestyle block owners. They also increase the risk of soil erosion.



## Control Methods

### Prevention

Spray or paint chemical repellents on trees and shrubs to discourage rabbit browsing. Start this when the tree is first planted and continue as the plant grows and weathers. We sell these at Akura Nursery in Masterton

Stopping rabbits from accessing your property or garden is the best long term method of control in urban areas. Exclusion fences need to be at least 80cm high, 20cm in the ground with a maximum mesh size of 3 cm. Trees can be protected with netting cylinders, plastic sheaths or steel guards.

It is also recommended to remove, where and when possible, such things as rubbish/slash piles, gorse, broom and other areas rabbits frequent, shelter or hide in.

### Control

Control rabbits in rural areas by shooting at night with a spotlight and a .22 rifle or shotgun. You must follow all legal and safety requirements for firearms. A successful night shoot can reduce a rabbit population by about 30 percent with two or three shoots necessary to gain good control. It is important to effectively cover all areas as any rabbits that have been missed become wary of a spotlight or the sound of a gun and vehicle.

**CAUTION: A VALID NEW ZEALAND GUN LICENSE IS REQUIRED UNDER NEW ZEALAND LAW FOR ANY USE OF FIRE ARMS**

### Pesticide control

Poisoning is the most cost-effective method of controlling rabbits. Poison is most effective from March to September, outside the main breeding season, when the young are likely to survive in burrows and re-infest an area. Rabbit poisons can affect all warm-blooded animals including humans.

Use Pindone pellets in bait stations in areas where rabbits have been grazing and scratching. This is a slow-acting anti-coagulant poison and is more effective in autumn and winter when there is less food available. Pindone must be used in bait stations unless you have an approved handler to place it on the ground. Contact us to request this charged service. We make up a more effective Pindone carrot for application on the ground.

Read the instructions carefully before use. Keep all poisons away from children and pets and follow label directions.

### **Biocontrol**

Three variations of the rabbit haemorrhagic calicivirus (RHDV1, RHDV1 K5 and RHDV2) are known to be in New Zealand and have controlled wild rabbit populations to varying degrees. The virus spreads between rabbits and a rabbit dies quickly once it begins to show symptoms. The virus only affects rabbits and hares, and does not affect cats, dogs or any other animals.

A variation of the virus was released in 2018 as New Zealand's feral rabbits had become increasingly immune to the RHDV1 strain. This was released on private land or in some areas where there is minimal public access. Find more information about this virus from Landcare Research and Ministry for Primary Industries.

Contact your local vet to vaccinate pet rabbits for protection from the RHD virus: pet rabbits should be vaccinated from 10 weeks of age, and boosters given according to your vet's recommendation.

### **Related Links**

Bionet - Consolidated Pest Management Resources <https://www.bionet.nz/>

GW Regional Pest Management Plan <https://www.gw.govt.nz/environment/pest-management/>

Department of Conservation <https://www.doc.govt.nz/nature/pests-and-threats/animal-pests/rabbits/>

Rabbit Watch <https://rabbitwatch.org.nz/home>

Pindone control of rabbits <https://www.gw.govt.nz/environment/pest-management/pest-animals/pest-animal-control-methods/pindone/>

Review of rabbit research regarding predators <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DWUUsBFChEE>

### **Rules**

Under Section 52 and 53 of the Biosecurity Act 1993 no person can sell, propagate, breed, distribute or otherwise spread any pest in a Pest Management Plan, or any unwanted organism. Not complying with Section 52 or 53 is an offence under the Act, and may result in penalties noted in Section 157(1).

An occupier within the Wellington Region shall ensure feral rabbits on land they occupy are always below level 5 of the Modified McLean Rabbit Infestation Scale 2012.

### **Management Programme**

Sustained Control programme