

# The feral goat (*Capra hircus*)

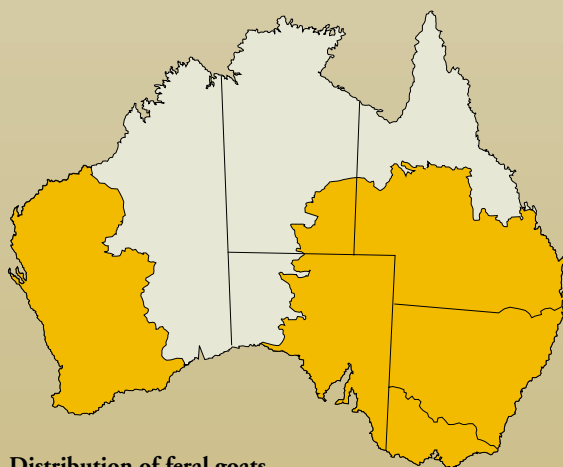


*The feral goat has established populations in a variety of habitats across Australia. It competes with native fauna and causes land degradation, threatening plant and animal species and ecological communities. The feral goat can be an agricultural pest, but also has commercial value and is harvested for its meat. To protect the environment, feral goat control programs are best undertaken in areas of high conservation value.*

## History

Goats arrived in Australia with the First Fleet in 1788. As they were small and hardy, ate a range of plants and provided milk and meat, they were convenient livestock for early European settlers. During the 19th century, sailors released goats onto islands and some areas of the mainland for emergency food. Certain breeds were imported for their hair. More recently, goats have been used to keep plantation forests and inland pastoral land free of weeds. Feral herds developed as these domestic goats escaped, were abandoned or were deliberately released.

Feral goats now occur in all Australian states and on many offshore islands, but are most common in the rocky or hilly semi-arid areas of western New South Wales, South Australia, Western Australia and Queensland. In 1996, there were about 2.6 million feral goats in Australia.



## Distribution of feral goats

Adapted from: Clarke GM et al (2000). *Environmental Pest Species in Australia*. Internal report, Department of the Environment and Heritage, Canberra.

## Ecology

Where dingoes and wild dogs are present, feral goats generally do poorly. However, they are often found in sheep-grazing areas, where dingoes and wild dogs have been removed or heavily controlled by pastoralists.

Feral goats live in herds, and although males and females live separately for much of the year they share about one square kilometre under good conditions, but a larger area when food or water is scarce. The two groups only mix together during the breeding season in autumn and winter, with females becoming sexually mature in their first year. Feral goats can breed twice a year, with twins and triplets being common.

Feral goats have a varied diet — leaves, twigs, bark, flowers, fruit and roots. They will eat most plant types in pastoral regions and often consume vegetation that is avoided by sheep or cattle.

## Impact

Feral goats have a major effect on native vegetation through soil damage and overgrazing of native herbs, grasses, shrubs and trees, which can cause erosion and prevent regeneration. They foul waterholes, and can introduce weeds through seeds carried in their dung.

Particularly during droughts, feral goats can compete with native animals and domestic stock for food, water and shelter. For example, they may threaten some yellow-footed rock wallaby populations by competing for rock shelters and food, leaving the wallabies exposed to a greater risk of predation by foxes and wedge-tailed eagles.

Feral goats carry footrot, and it is difficult to cure sheep of this disease because they can become reinfected through contact with feral goat populations. They could also carry exotic diseases such as foot-and-mouth disease, should there be an outbreak in Australia.



Feral goats gather in herds and need to drink, allowing them to be trapped in yards erected around watering holes.  
Photo: NSW Agriculture

## Control

Control of feral goats is a complex issue. While they are a major environmental and agricultural pest, they are seen by some to have commercial value, and are also used as a game species by recreational hunters. Feral goat populations tend to recover well from culling and, except on islands, eradication is usually impossible. To protect the environment, control is best focused on areas that contain threatened native plants, animals and communities.

In arid and semiarid country, feral goats are sometimes mustered for slaughter, and young females may be sold as breeding stock for mohair flocks. In inaccessible areas, shooting from helicopters is the most efficient method of removing small numbers of feral goats. This is considered humane, as the goats are not subject to mustering, yarding or transportation.

When looking for food, feral goats centre their movements around the availability of permanent water. In times of drought, they need to drink more and stay closer to water. This makes the water source an ideal place to trap feral goats by surrounding it with goat-proof fences and using one-way gates that allow the goats into the trap to drink but not out again.

A technique known as the 'Judas goat' method is used to locate small herds. A feral goat is caught, fitted with a radio collar and released to join a herd. Signals from the radio reveal the location of the herd, which is shot.



Feral goats can stand on their hind legs and even climb trees to eat vegetation, resulting in a high browse line. This restricts the access of stock and some native species to this food.  
Photo: R Henzell, South Australian Animal and Plant Control Commission

## How the Australian Government is dealing with a national problem

Competition and land degradation by feral goats is listed as a key threatening process under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* (the EPBC Act). Under the EPBC Act, the Commonwealth in consultation with the states and territories has developed the *Threat Abatement Plan for Competition and Land Degradation by Feral Goats*.

The threat abatement plan aims to reduce the impacts of feral goats on native wildlife by:

- implementing feral goat control programs in specific areas of high conservation priority
- encouraging the development and use of innovative and humane control methods for feral goat management
- educating land managers and relevant organisations to improve their knowledge of feral goat impacts, and ensure skilled and effective participation in control activities
- collecting and disseminating information to improve our understanding of feral goat ecology in Australia, the impacts of goats, and methods to control them.

Feral goat control programs also need to be coordinated with other activities that may be taking place, including the on-ground protection of threatened plants and animals and control of other invasive species such as rabbits and feral pigs.

The threat abatement plan provides a framework that will enable the best use of the resources available for feral goat management. The Commonwealth will continue to work with the states and territories in dealing with this national problem.

More information about the threat abatement plan can be found at <http://www.deh.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/tap/goats>

## Further reading

Parkes J, Henzell R and Pickles G (1999).

*Managing Vertebrate Pests: Feral Goats*.

Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

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