



Farmnote

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Feral donkey

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by staff of Vertebrate Pest Research Services, Forrestfield and Andrew Johnson, Derby

Donkeys (*Equus asinus*) were first imported in substantial numbers into Australia in 1866 by Sir Thomas Elder. Until the 1930s, when their use declined due to motor transport, they were used as pack and draught animals in outlying areas of Western Australia.

The first record of feral donkeys in Western Australia is from the Kimberley in the early 1930s, but it is possible that some were feral much earlier.

Distribution

Feral donkeys are now widespread in the pastoral areas of Western Australia. The largest populations occur in the Kimberley. In the early 1980's, when populations of donkeys were high, the density in the southern part of the East Kimberley as estimated from an aerial survey was 1/km². One donkey was counted for every three cattle seen in the survey.

Habitat

In the dry season in the Kimberley feral donkeys concentrate on the flats on the major river and creek systems. Fewer are seen on the lower slopes, foothills, and along the minor creeks, while a few occur in hilly country. Their distribution is closely similar to that of cattle in the same areas at the same time of year.

In the Pilbara donkeys inhabit breakaway country, especially the 'pea bush' flats. At other times they are found in areas of mulga and other acacia species.

In the Goldfields they are confined to eucalypt sandplains with granite hills, and some lake systems.

Food habits

Feral donkeys are versatile foragers. They eat a wide variety of grasses, herbs and bushes.

Biology

Donkeys, like camels, can reduce their evaporative water loss when they become dehydrated. They are able to reduce the water content of their faeces, and can continue to eat when deprived of water. They can tolerate extreme loss of body water. These abilities have let to their success as a feral animal in Australia.

In hot dry conditions feral donkeys do not move very far from water, as they prefer to during ever 24 hours. Their home ranges vary widely in size depending on the habitat. In arid areas home ranges may average 32 km². This may be reduced to 19 km² in less arid areas while in the best grassland habitat average range size may be as low as 3 m². The home ranges of individuals overlap substantially.

Feral donkeys live in social groups which may contain one or both sexes. The composition of such groups is unstable, some individual moving between groups.

In the Kimberley feral donkeys produce foals between July and March, but most are born just before or during the time that green feed is available. Both females (jennies) and males (jacks) become sexually mature at about 2 years of age.

Damage

Feral donkeys compete for food with domestic stock, particularly where food is scarce. In other parts of the world they have been shown to alter the composition of desert vegetation by overgrazing. The pads or trails contribute to soil erosion, especially where they move regularly to and from water. They sometimes foul water holes and may prevent other animals from drinking.

Control

Under the *Agriculture and Related Resources Protection Act 1976*, feral donkeys are declared animals and attempts are made to control them in the wild.

Some meat from feral donkeys is sold as pet meat, but commercial use is limited by distance and the rough terrain. Trapping at water sources has variable results, and cannot be used in some areas of the Kimberley because there are too many watering places. Donkeys are difficult to muster because of their habit of breaking away when driven. Shooting from the ground is difficult because of the rough terrain.

Shooting from helicopters has made a valuable contribution to the control programs for feral donkeys in the Kimberley. Between 1980 and 1988 the population in the East Kimberley has been reduced by 87 per cent using this method.

The 'udas' technique for feral donkey control utilizes radiotracking equipment and donkeys to locate other feral donkeys for eradication. A Judas animal is fitted with a collar to which a radio transmitter is attached and is then released in the area where feral donkeys are to be controlled. The Judas animal soon joins a feral group, which is then located by radiotracking. The uncollared animals are then destroyed.

This technique was first employed on a trial basis in the Kimberley in 1994 and since 1995 it has become the primary means of control. Since this time over 25,000 feral donkeys have been culled in

'Judas' operations, over an area of 150 000 km² mostly below the Leopold Ranges. The ultimate aim is to eradicate donkeys in as many areas of the Kimberley as possible.

Further information

For advice on feral donkey control contact any office of Agriculture Western Australia or the South Perth office on 9368 3333.

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