

Trapping feral animals in bushland remnants

Wheatbelt NRM factsheet



INTRODUCTION

Wheatbelt NRM's Biodiversity team helps landholders across the Avon River Basin protect native remnant bushland on their property, which in turn helps the plants and animals that depend on it for food and shelter.

Introduced feral pests such as foxes and cats are a major threat to the survival of many native Wheatbelt species. These pest species have also been implicated in the decline or extinction of dozens of species of mammals, birds, reptiles and frogs.

In Western Australia, foxes are officially listed as a declared pest and all land managers are required to make a reasonable effort to control foxes on their property. Foxes are very mobile creatures, so it is important that neighbouring landholders work together to keep feral numbers down. If groups of neighbours work together simultaneously to control foxes, the chance of foxes reinvading the properties is reduced.

There are many ways to control foxes, including trapping, baiting, den destruction or fumigation, and the use of guard animals such as alpacas. Using a combination of these methods during strategic phases of the breeding cycle gives you the greatest chance of successful pest control.

WHICH TRAP TO USE?

When buying traps to target feral foxes and cats, look for these features:

- **trap dimensions** – of least 900mm x 450mm x 450mm*
- **rear bait door** – for easier access placing bait which avoids getting your scent on the trap
- **mesh size** – smaller than 50mm to avoid mouth injuries when fox tries to escape.

*NOTE: longer traps of 1200mm or more are even more effective for successful captures.

LOCATION

Before placing a trap, spend some time working out where the target animals are moving to determine the most effective placement. Evidence of feral animals to watch out for include:

- tracks
- droppings
- feeding evidence
- listening for them
- digging (Figure 12, p10)
- scent – foxes and male cats have very distinct odours.



Figure 1: Set the trap near an animal path



The most perfect cage trap setup will still fail in a location where the animal does not pass nearby regularly. Make sure to place traps on level surfaces in areas near where the feral predators usually feed, or have been seen. Feral foxes and cats will often follow or be found near:

- fence lines
- tracks (Figure 11, p9)
- roads
- creek lines
- buildings (sheds, abandoned houses).

Keep an eye out for scent pads, scratchings, holes in fences and carcasses.

It is important to record the location of all the traps you put out. This way someone else can easily check it for you if you are not able to. Mark a tree or fencepost near the trap with flagging tape to make the location easier to find again. Taking note of GPS coordinates is also a good idea.

TRAP SETUP

You need to set up the trap so animals feel comfortable entering it. (Figure 2)

Animals can be wary about entering traps, if they:

- **smell of humans** – wear gloves and restrict your movement around trap when setting up (Figure 6, p6)
- **don't look very natural**
- **are unsteady or unnatural underfoot**
- **think there is only one entry/exit point** – traps can be set up to have the visual illusion of being a tunnel which makes the animals more comfortable
- **smell unnatural** – leave trap out in weather, even when not in use, to reduce smell and 'newness' of trap. Don't give up if you're not successful right away. Even experienced trappers may need to weather traps for some time before having success. Call the Biodiversity team for more information.



Figure 2: Look for a natural setting





Figure 3: Spread soil over mesh floor so the animal is not walking on metal

SETTING THE TRAP

You will quickly get a feel for how to set the trigger:

- If it's too difficult to trigger, the predator will be able to steal the bait without setting the trap off.
- If it's set too fine, the trap may go off if the animal just bumps against it from the outside –and that will probably scare it off and it probably won't come near the trap again.
- Traps that are set too finely are also likely to be triggered by a small gust of wind.
- You may want to grease the setting catch or bend it slightly to adjust sensitivity.
- You can also make a small burr on the catch which makes it set a little easier.
- Reduce the contact you have with the trap – use gloves when handling the trap.
- Wipe the bait over areas of the trap that you touch to reduce the human smell on the trap.
- You can also cover the trap with branches and twigs so that it appears more natural, this will create a tunnel effect. (Figure 5, p5) Traps where the animal senses a 'tunnel' (ie. clear light at both ends) can get greater catch rates.



Figure 4: Cover the trap with hessian



MAKING THE TRAP MORE INVITING

- Cover the trap with a hessian sack, so the animal feels less exposed – this will also help to reduce the chance of animals taking the bait through the mesh of the trap (Figure 4, p4).
- Push the trap down in to the soil lightly, so the floor of the trap is sandy (Figure 3, p4) – this will make the floor of the trap more natural.
- Scatter a small amount of soil and leaves on the base of the trap – making sure there is nothing under the trap plate that will prevent the trap from being triggered.
- Ensure that the trap is firmly placed and won't move when an animal enters it—peg traps to the ground.
- Covering the trap also prevents animals from accessing bait from the side or prematurely setting off the trap.
- Use an attractant to bring an animal into an area such as fox faeces/urine and commercially prepared fox lures. Success varies greatly with different populations so, as with baits, experiment to see which works best for you.
- Avoid placing traps in areas of high meat ant activity – unfortunately there is no way of getting rid of the ants, your best option when you get an ant problem around your trap is to move it to a new location, as meat ants can interfere with bait and also harm enclosed animals.
- Ensure the trap is not in a highly visible location – if a fox sees another animal get caught in a trap it will learn from that, so place the trap in under some shrubs or something similar (Figure 9, p7).

COVERING TRAP WITH HESSIAN SACK:

- reduces non-target captures
- provides shelter for captured animals
- prevents animals from taking bait through mesh rather than entering trap
- makes trap appear more natural.



Figure 5: Disguise the trap with sticks and leaves



BAIT TIPS

- **Foxes are attracted by smells** – make the trap site very smelly by rubbing bait on nearby fence posts and tree trunks, or dripping tuna or sardine oil near the trap.
- **Cats are attracted by visual and audio lures** – shiny tinsel that flaps in the wind and reflects light helps lure cats from greater distances, while bait lures them inside.
- **Leave fur on rabbit bait as a visual lure** – this makes them look like live prey from a distance.
- **Tie bait to top of trap, just in from trigger mechanism** – this reduces the chance of the animal looking at their feet when entering the trap and stepping over the plate that triggers the door to shut (Figure 8).

BAIT / ATTRACTANT

Try as many different baits as possible, including:

- rabbit
- chicken
- beef
- mix of bacon or animal fat, parmesan cheese and feathers.
- sardines
- offal
- kangaroo meat

Sometimes the main prey species can be the most effective bait. In most parts of rural Australia, rabbit is likely to be the main prey species for both cats and foxes. Projects conducted by Wheatbelt NRM contractors have had a lot of success using rabbits.

If you are having no success with one bait type, try something else.

Traps with rear door access are useful in minimising human scent in the trap.



Figure 6: Wear gloves to minimise human scent on bait



Figure 7: Feral rabbits make handy bait



Figure 8: Attach bait to roof behind trip plate





Figure 9: A well set-up trap

FREE FEEDING

This method is particularly useful when you are targeting an older fox or any other wary individual.

- For the first few nights, wire the trap open so animals can go in and out of the trap without the door closing.
- Place bait in and around the trap.
- Foxes are very wary of new situations, so by providing 'free' bait you will encourage the fox to become more comfortable entering the trap.
- Once you know that your target animal has been in and out of the trap several times, it is time to set the trap.
- When the trap is set, the target animal will not be as 'on edge' as they were the first time they entered the trap. This will lower the chance of the animal escaping as the door closes.

IF TARGET ANIMAL VISITING TRAP BUT NOT GETTING CAUGHT, TRY:

- free feeding
- checking trigger setting
- using a different type of bait
- a remote sensing camera to observe the animal's behaviour.

IF TRAPPING ISN'T WORKING:

- move to a new trap location
- try a different bait type
- add visual or olfactory lures
- call us to discuss further options.



ANIMAL WELFARE

In Western Australia, trapping foxes is covered by the *Animal Welfare Act 2002*, which states that the capture and destruction of feral predators must be done in a humane way.

From an animal welfare perspective, cage traps are preferred over leg-hold traps as fewer injuries are sustained and non-target species can be released more readily. The old, unpadded steel-jawed traps of yesteryear are now illegal in Western Australia.

It is very important, that when you set a cage trap in the evening you are prepared to return and check the trap at first light the following morning. You need to have a plan for safely and humanely handling and disposing of any trapped pests or injured non-target animals.

It is possible that you will trap a non-target animal. You can release any animal that is unharmed or has minor cuts or abrasions. For more serious injuries it is important to allow the animal time to recover in a quiet, dark area before release. Otherwise euthanase it using an appropriate technique.

SAFELY HANDLING ANIMALS

When handling wild animals take care not to place yourself in any danger. Bites or scratches from these creatures can cause nasty injuries and become infected.

Make sure to avoid contact with them or their body fluids, which can also spread parasites or diseases.

Ensure that your gun is licensed and observe all legal and safety requirements.



Figure 10: Feral cat captured in the Wheatbelt

REDUCING NON-TARGET CAPTURES

Catching non-target animals in your trap wastes your time and effort and causes unnecessary stress to the animals captured. You can reduce the number of non-target animals accidentally caught by:

- setting traps in the evening and returning to check them first thing next morning
- covering traps with hessian to reduce the chance of baits attracting non-target bird species
- keeping traps closed during the day
- ✧ target animals such as cats and foxes are most active at dusk, dawn and during the night
- ✧ common non-target captures include reptiles, crows and other birds, which are most active during the daytime.



IMPORTANT TIPS

- Traps must be big enough to hold whole a fox, including its tail.
- Trigger mechanisms must be far enough inside traps so the door won't close on the fox's rear and stay open allowing it to escape.
- Trap doors must be able to swing shut freely.
- Place traps so they seem like a natural part of their surroundings. Foxes will easily recognise a trap sitting in the middle of nowhere!
- Camouflage traps with leaves, sticks, straw bales, and hessian.
- If you're having issues with the bait being taken through the back of the trap, try placing the rear of trap against an obstruction to avoid animals interfering with the bait from outside without entering the cage.
- Traps should be covered with hessian or similar and placed in a location sheltered from rain and wind where possible.
- If traps are to be left set during the day (*strongly discouraged*), ensure they will remain in the shade as the sun moves. You may unintentionally catch a native animal or pet and wish to release it unharmed.
- Permanent trap sites are best when trapping foxes as it can take up to 12 weeks before a fox is comfortable going into a cage trap.
- Traps should be set at least 50m from dens. Foxes are habitual and will use the same den year after year.
- Vixens (female foxes) are harder to catch than dogs (male foxes) as they are more cautious.
- If a lactating vixen is captured try to find the cubs and euthanase them in their den using carbon monoxide (CO). CO is the only registered fumigant for controlling foxes.
- Younger cats are more successfully caught in treadle plate traps as they don't rely on height or strength to set the trap off.

DON'T USE CAR EXHAUST FUMES

- Vehicle exhaust fumes do not contain a sufficient concentration of carbon monoxide (CO) for euthanasing any species.
- **IT MUST NOT BE USED to euthanase any captured animals.**



Figure 11: Fox, dog and cat footprints

Source: <http://www.bushcraftuk.com/forum/showthread.php?t=68389>





FOR MORE INFORMATION

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Figure 12: Fox diggings

(Source: Pest Smart CRC via NSW DPI, <http://www.pestsmart.org.au/wp-content/gallery/fox-diggings/FoxDig.jpg>)

REFERENCES

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<http://landcaresj.com.au/2016/05/14/feral-animal-trapping/>

How To Trap A Fox: www.havahart.com/blog/fox/

Fox Trapping using Cage Traps

<http://www.torbay.southcoastwa.org.au/resources/ferals/FoxTrappingFlyer.pdf>

Standard Operating Procedure FOX006: Trapping of Foxes using cage traps:

<http://www.pestsmart.org.au/trapping-of-foxes-using-cage-traps/>

Standard Operating Procedure GEN001: Methods of euthanasia:

<http://www.pestsmart.org.au/methods-of-euthanasia/>

