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10-2024

## Feral goat

Department of Primary Industries and Regional Development, Western Australia

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# Feral goat

DPIRD-144

This factsheet provides information regarding feral goats in Western Australia (WA).



**Image 1: Feral goats**

## Introduction

The goat (*Capra hircus*) was one of the first animals to be domesticated, 8 to 10 thousand years ago. Archaeological work indicates the earliest attempts at domestication were in dry hills surrounding the Mediterranean basin. The ability of goats to utilise the coarse browse of mountainous areas made them suitable for domestication, in preference to sheep. With large-scale domestication of goats throughout the world, goats escaped and established feral goat herds on most continents. Overgrazing by goats has caused severe environmental damage, worldwide.

## Introduction and spread

Goats arrived in Australia with the first fleet. They were introduced to many areas by early settlers and spread further by miners and railway gangs, who used them as a source of milk and meat. Goats were introduced into WA in the early colonial era. They were kept for a mohair industry and to provide milk, butter, and meat. They were also used for light haulage and goat racing. In 1870, 50 goats were taken to Shark Bay, WA. By 1894, there were 4500 goats in WA, and by 1905, they were reported throughout the state. Large herds grazed on sheep and cattle stations; these were dispersed when the mohair industry did not develop as hoped. Breeding groups escaped and formed feral herds on many stations. Feral goats were declared vermin in the Upper Gascoyne district in 1928, at Marble Bar and Port Hedland the following year, and Mullewa and Meekatharra in 1954.

Feral goats are declared pests under the *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management Act 2007* for the whole of WA. The Western Australian Organism List (WAOL), on the department website at [dpird.wa.gov.au](http://dpird.wa.gov.au), contains information on the control and keeping categories to which it has been assigned. Search for feral goat on the WAOL using the scientific name, *Capra hircus*.

## Distribution

Today there are herds of feral goats in most pastoral areas of the state. The largest populations are found in the Shires of Shark Bay, Carnarvon, Murchison, Yalgoo, and Northampton. Mobs are also found in districts including the Upper Gascoyne, Meekatharra, Mt Magnet, and Ashburton, and the Pilbara Esperance-Goldfields regions.

Isolated populations also occur in the higher rainfall areas of the south-west of WA, where patches of scrub and forest provide protection from human control and make management difficult.

## Biology

Goats have a gestation period of around 150 days and often bear twins. In periods of favourable climatic conditions and plentiful food, breeding may occur twice a year. A female goat can breed at the age of 6 to 7 months. Goats can be selective in their grazing habits, preferring shrubs to grasses and herbs.

## Impact

Where goat numbers are unmanageable, their appetite and grazing habits cause serious damage. They destroy vegetation and disturb the balance of plant species. They can strip the leaves and bark from shrubs and valuable pasture species, including saltbush and soft spinifex, often fail to recover from such heavy grazing. These plants are replaced by annuals and less valuable perennial species. In WA, feral goats browse on mulga, which provides a drought reserve for sheep during summer. Overgrazing by goats may also lead to massive soil erosion, permanently reducing the carrying capacity of the rangeland. Disturbance by the sharp hooves of goats and the characteristic pawing of the ground by males exposes the soil to erosion by wind and rain.

In addition to their impact on the landscape, feral goats compete with native animals and domestic stock for shelter, water, and food. They are also susceptible to several exotic livestock diseases, including foot and mouth disease, rabies, and rinderpest. They would act as a reservoir of infection if the diseases reached Australia.

## Control methods

Several control methods have been used to reduce feral goat numbers, including shooting from the ground or helicopters, using Judas goats to locate herds, mustering, and trapping. Mustering, trapping, and helicopter shooting are the main methods used to remove feral goats. Helicopter shooting is particularly useful in removing goats in inaccessible areas.

## Management in pastoral areas

Feral goat numbers are managed so they are reduced to, or maintained at, a level that ensures minimal environmental impact on the rangelands. Feral goat aerial surveys are conducted to monitor population numbers in the southern rangeland. Data results collected from these surveys and other sources are used to ensure landholders are aware of goat numbers. With this information, pastoralists are encouraged to develop management strategies to reduce and manage feral goats to minimise their impact.

Under the management policy, commercialisation of the feral goat resource is permitted, under strict conditions. Pastoralists can muster and remove feral goats to abattoirs or export. A waybill in accordance with the *Biosecurity and Agriculture Management (Identification and Movement of Stock and Apiaries) Regulations 2013 (the BAM (IMSA) Regulations)* must accompany all movement of goats. In addition, with the approval of the Pastoral Lands Board, and under specifications set by the department, feral goats may be domesticated and grazed as stock. Mustered goats that are not removed or domesticated must be destroyed.

The process of domesticating feral goats involves training the animals to respect electric fences. Feral goats are held in a compound of specified design where they will encounter a plain wire electric fence. Once goats have learned to avoid the fence, they are released into a larger grazing paddock with electric fence barriers. As a condition of domestication, goats must be identified and marked in accordance with the *BAM (IMSA) Regulations*.

## Management in agriculture areas

There is growing interest in grazing goats in agricultural areas. However, if feral goats from pastoral areas are relocated for this purpose, permits to move and introduce the goats are required from the department. These permits must be obtained before the goats arrive on the property, and each consignment of feral goats must be held behind approved fencing for at least one month. These requirements are specified to prevent the animals escaping and becoming a problem in reserves and other areas. Unmarked goats must be marked within 7 days of arrival at the property, to deter theft, and provide a means to trace diseased animals.

No permits are required for the keeping of domestic goats or domesticated feral goats. However, domesticated feral goats can only come from pastoral properties approved by the Pastoral Lands Board as domestic goat grazing enterprises. Goats, whether domesticated or feral, behave very differently to sheep. They are determined animals and will test fences so farmers need to ensure the fencing is adequate to contain them.

## More information

Refer to the department website at [dpird.wa.gov.au](http://dpird.wa.gov.au) for more information about the following:

- Western Australian Organism List (WAOL)
- Declared pests
- Invasive species permits, applications and fees

## Contact us

### **Pest and Disease Information Service (PaDIS)**

+61 8 9368 3080 | [Email PaDIS \(padis@dpird.wa.gov.au\)](mailto:padis@dpird.wa.gov.au)

Last updated October 2024

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