

Feral Animals

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Contents

Feral Animals	2
What Is a Feral Animal?	2
How Animals Become Feral	4
Feral Animals and the Ecosystem	10
Feral Cats	14
Feral Rabbits	16
How Feral Animals Are Controlled	18
Indigenous Rangers: Caring for Country	24
Working Towards a Pest-Free Future	26
Brumbies Should Not Be Allowed in the Alpine National Park	27
Glossary	31
Index	32

Feral Animals

What Is a Feral Animal?

Feral animals are animals that live in the wild but are not **native wildlife**. Instead, these animals have moved into an environment where they do not belong and have become **pests**.

Farm animals, such as pigs, can become feral when they escape from captivity. Pets, such as cats and dogs, can also become feral when they are left to survive without help from humans.

Some animals, such as foxes, have always lived in the wild, but they become pests when they are introduced into a different environment.



Feral foxes are common in cities as well as rural areas.

Feral animals are pests in many different ways. Feral cats prey on native animals, while foxes kill **livestock**. Feral rabbits graze on vegetation that provides food and shelter for native wildlife. Some feral animals, such as wild horses, damage the environment with their hard **hooves**.

Feral animals are **not** cared for by humans, and therefore they often carry diseases. They can spread these diseases to other animals, and also to **humans**.

Most feral animals have few predators and **will adapt** to, and thrive in, their new environment. Often, their numbers increase rapidly.



a feral cat in the forest



Feral rabbits graze on native vegetation and crops, causing serious damage.

How Animals Become Feral

Animals become feral in ways that are sometimes surprising. Goldfish make gentle pets, but if they are released into rivers and streams, they become pests.

When goldfish live in waterways, they eat the animals and plants that native species depend upon. As they hunt, goldfish scoot along the bottom of waterways, turning the water muddy. In this way, goldfish destroy aquatic habitats. As a result, once goldfish arrive, many native species do not survive.

Goldfish can become giants in the wild. A goldfish found in the Vasse River in Western Australia weighed almost two kilograms.



Sometimes, animals are introduced into a new environment to control pests. However, introduced animals can become pests themselves.

Cane toads were released in Australia to eat beetles that were destroying sugar cane crops. Instead of eating the beetles, the toads mostly feed on other native insects, lizards and frogs.

Cane toads are poisonous at all stages of their life cycle – as eggs, tadpoles, young toads and adults. Their poison kills native animals that prey on them. Even large animals, such as freshwater crocodiles, can die from eating cane toads.



This map shows where cane toads live in Australia and where scientists think they will spread to in the future.



Cane toads have adapted to Australia's vast distances by growing longer legs that help them travel further.

Feral camels were first introduced into Australia in the 1800s to help explorers travel through the dry inland areas of the continent. Then, during the late 1800s, thousands more camels were shipped to Australia to be used for transport. Long **camel trains** carried supplies to inland towns and sheep stations.

By the 1930s, camels were no longer useful, as goods were transported by road and rail. As a result, many camels were released into the wild and their numbers rapidly increased.



This map shows where feral camels can be found in Australia.

The camel trains were controlled by cameleers (people who ride camels), who came from countries such as India and Afghanistan.



Today, there are over one million feral camels throughout central Australia. The camels move in groups and eat most vegetation, including twigs and thorns. They destroy many plants that native animals depend upon for food.

Camels have wide, heavy feet. As they move about, the camels damage sand dunes and waterholes. These are important habitats for native animals and they are also important cultural sites for First Nations peoples.



A sign warns drivers to watch out for feral camels in central Australia.



feral camels in the Simpson Desert, South Australia