

06 PREDATOR CONTROL

COMPREHENSIVE PEST & PREDATOR CONTROL IS AN ESSENTIAL ELEMENT OF RUNNING ANY STYLE OF SHOOT AS PREDATION PRESSURE CAN QUICKLY RENDER AN OPERATION UNVIABLE. YOUNG GAME BIRDS ARE VULNERABLE TO A RANGE OF PESTS SO PROTECTING RELEASED GAME BIRDS WHILE THEY MATURE AND ACCLIMATISE IS A PRIORITY.

While predator species vary around the country, the common ones are mustelids (stoats, ferrets, and the less common weasel) and feral cats. Alongside these, rats and hedgehogs will also need to be controlled.

Farm pests such as rabbits, hares, possums, wallabies, deer, or pigs may not prey directly upon game birds, but should nonetheless be kept under control.

All these species have the potential to damage tree plantations and annual crops. The gamekeeper, going about their usual work, is well placed to keep on top of these.



If the property over which you operate includes any native bush or at-risk species, it may be worth consulting with council or Predator Free 2050 as some funding or other resources may be available.

The PF2050 website also has a wealth of information on predator control.

The backbone of any control work is a trapping line that covers as much of the property as possible. The majority of these should be tunnel traps, while a few larger cage-type cat traps are also recommended where appropriate.

How you set things up and what type of traps you use will largely be dictated by available time and budget, and whether the gamekeeping resources are full time professional or part time amateur.

There are many trap designs available, and new ones being developed all the time. They are increasingly expensive and some are more effective than others, so take the time to trial a few.

TUNNEL TRAPS

The workhorse of any predation control, these are simply a kill-type trap set in some form of artificial tunnel. They will catch most small ground pests that naturally hunt by investigating dark and inviting places that may hold prey.

Today operators are now using the DOC 150-200 traps, which are fitted into a purpose-built box. While they are a very effective and approved on animal welfare grounds, they are expensive and bulky to set in large numbers. For this reason, many gamekeepers prefer to rely on the tried and trusted Fenn traps. They are well priced and small enough to carry in number while being easy to set into improvised tunnels without the need for a large bulky box.

All ground predators follow natural runs to get about, and the experienced eye will identify these corridors. Hedges, shelter belts, drains and banks are all good places to start. If there is no obvious lead into your tunnel, create one with a branch or rocks. Stoats hate being in the open, so a great place to catch them is near a gateway. If they are forced to cross an open space, they will often dive into the first hiding place they see – this is where your trap should be set.

Finally, if you have caught well in one trap, leave it there – you have hit the right spot! Animals generally tend to follow the same runs. If others are not so successful after several weeks, consider moving them. Over time, you will end up with a network of low-maintenance traps that pick up all new arrivals onto your property before they get established.

WHETHER OR NOT TO BAIT A TUNNEL TRAP

Baiting can undoubtedly help to draw animals into your traps, but as mentioned above, if they are correctly set in the right place, they will catch anyway. An exception to this would be if you are having problems around a pheasant pen, perhaps with a ferret that has been helping itself to your birds, baiting might assist you to catch up with it a little more quickly.

Keeping baits fresh can be time consuming. As gamekeepers operate over relatively small blocks of land and are constantly travelling over the area, having traps set in good places year-round is generally sufficient to keep on top of things.



CAGE TRAPS

Cage traps are particularly useful when dealing with a problematic animal that cannot be located by other means, especially if they have become comfortable with entering pens or other areas to visit your game stocks.

As with all trapping, spend some time choosing a location and dressing the trap to make it look and feel as natural as possible. Ensure it is on level ground and well pegged down to prevent any movement when the animal enters. Wary cats will be spooked by any movement at all, as will the feel of wire under their paws – so spread some fine soil on the floor to cover up the wire (but be sure it does not interfere with the trip mechanism).



Unlike tunnel traps, cage traps must be baited to be successful. Oily salmon skin is particularly good, but anything will do.

BAIT STATIONS

It is good policy to employ as many bait stations over the property as possible. Focus on areas where rodents are attracted to such as buildings, feed stores and bird hoppers. Keep the stations topped up to ensure rodents get a full dose.

NIGHT-TIME OPERATIONS

Despite the long days, the gamekeeper must find time to get out at night as often as they can, but at least once/twice week depending on the size of the property and the extent of any pest problems. Not only is this a very efficient method for controlling a range of pests & predators, but it will also give you a very good overview of what you have and where.

Traditionally this was done with a spotlight, however, increasingly thermal spotters/sights are being used. Safety is paramount when carrying out night-time shooting and only experienced people with knowledge of the ground should be involved. It is also courteous to let the neighbours know.

TRAINED PEST DOGS

A well-trained dog can be invaluable in assisting with the location of predators, particularly feral cats. If a problem animal is known to be active in a certain area, working the dog through it can frequently yield a good result. When disturbed, most cats will climb a tree or go to ground where an experienced dog will mark the location. This method is also very effective for locating litters of kittens.



USING EXTRA HELP

Be cautious when accepting the help of others in your pest control endeavours, particularly for night shooting. Control of feral cats is time consuming and if carried out incorrectly the problem can be exacerbated with a missed shot – a second chance will rarely arise. Some well-meaning but inexperienced shooters may do more harm than good, as in their eagerness to help they may be tempted to take an unrealistic shot.

Feral cats that have been disturbed without control quickly become very cunning and tend to move around a lot – making them hard to track. In the long run patience usually pays off; it is better to not take the shot and 'keep in touch' with the animal until a better opportunity arises.

ANIMAL WELFARE

It is important to remember that the highest animal welfare standards should be maintained at all times on any predator control program. Whether you are using a trap or a firearm, select the correct tool for the job to ensure a humane kill. Traps, especially live capture cage type, must be checked daily.

BOOTS ON THE GROUND

Finally, there is no substitute for time spent out on the property. The reason gamekeepers are so effective at controlling problem animals is the amount of time spent on the land and the repetitive nature of their daily routine. Having suitable firearms and trapping equipment on board accounts for many animals that might otherwise be missed.