

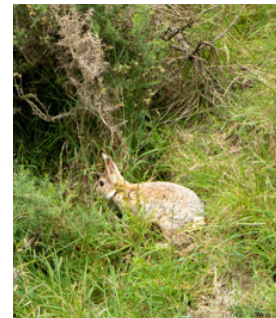
# Rabbits

## Why are they a pest?

Feral rabbits are small mammalian herbivores that inhabit grasslands at low altitudes across the Otago region.

They were introduced to Aotearoa New Zealand in the early 1800s for meat and hunting, but in the absence of predators they have become a significant pest in Otago. Rabbits are a serious threat to our biodiversity, environment, and economy. They graze native seedlings and vegetation, compete with stock for pasture and crops, and cause soil erosion and degradation.

Rabbits reproduce quickly. Females can be pregnant for 70% of the year and are capable of adjusting their litter size according to food supply, so rabbit populations are capable of rebounding quickly from natural disasters or control pressures. Rabbits as young as five months old can produce up to 50 offspring each year.



## What do they look like?

- **Size:** Adults can reach the size of a small cat, weighing up to 2 kg.
- **Appearance:** Usually grey-brown in colour with a light underside. Some other colour variations occur in the wild (black, white, and orange).
- **Signs:** Any evidence of rabbits being present, such as burrows, scratchings, or scat (poo).
- **Similar species:** Hares can be distinguished from feral rabbits as hares are solitary, much larger in body size with long, black-tipped ears, and large muscular hindquarters.
- **Habitat:** Includes grasslands at low altitude across the Otago region.

### Common name:

Rabbit

### Scientific name:

*Oryctolagus cuniculus*

### Management programme:

Sustained control

The sustained control programme aims to provide for ongoing control of the pest to reduce its impacts on values and spread to other properties.



An example of a pellet heap

## What are the rules?

ORC does not do rabbit control on private land. You are responsible for controlling the rabbits on your land.

### This means:

- All **land occupiers** must control feral rabbit levels on their land to level 3 or below on the Modified McLean Scale (3 MMS).
- There is also a good neighbour rule for rabbits. If you are controlling feral rabbit levels at or below 3 MMS within 500 m of your property boundary, then your neighbours must do the same if they receive written direction from an **Authorised Person**. This is so your hard work doesn't go to waste if a neighbouring property isn't doing their part. Good neighbour rules bind all landowners, including the Crown (e.g. Department of Conservation, Land Information New Zealand).
- You **must not** discharge a firearm within or across a property before or during a control operation using bait unless under the instruction or supervision of an **Authorised Person**. This will scare all the rabbits and render the operation mostly ineffective.

## What should I do?

Rabbit management needs to be coordinated and ongoing. Control options need to be tailored to the size, type, and location of a property.

Depending on the severity of the rabbit problem on a property, you may need to engage a professional contractor.

A good contractor will advise which type of control would be most effective on a property and when to carry out control, and will discuss any other factors that may impact the result, e.g. property rabbit fencing.

For more information on rabbit management tools visit: [orc.govt.nz/rabbitmanagement](http://orc.govt.nz/rabbitmanagement)

## Modified McLean Scale

The Modified McLean Scale (MMS) is a scale used by councils to determine rabbit population levels through examining rabbit signs.

It helps with regulation to make sure landowners are managing rabbit numbers to a level set in the Regional Pest Management Plan.

Otago's Regional Pest Management Plan has set the scale for Otago at a maximum of level 3. As a general rule, if you see groups of rabbit droppings less than 10 metres apart, there's a problem and you need to take action.

Scale	Rabbit infestation
1	No signs found. No rabbits seen.
2	Very infrequent signs present. Unlikely to see rabbits.
3	Pellet heaps spaced 10 m or more apart on average. Odd rabbits seen; signs and some pellet heaps showing up.
4	Pellet heaps spaced between 5 m and 10 m apart on average. Pockets of rabbits; signs and fresh burrows very noticeable.
5	Pellet heaps spaced 5 m or less apart on average. Infestation spreading out from heavy pockets.
6	Signs very frequent with pellet heaps often less than 5 m apart over the whole area. Rabbits may be seen over the whole area.
7	Signs very frequent with 2-3 pellet heaps often less than 5 m apart over the whole area. Rabbits may be seen in large numbers over the whole area.
8	Signs very frequent with 3 or more pellet heaps often less than 5 m apart over the whole area. Rabbits likely to be seen in large numbers over the whole area.

Table: Modified McLean Scale (Source: National Pest Control Agencies).

## Definitions .....

**Authorised Person** — under the Biosecurity Act 1993, an Authorised Person is authorised to administer and enforce the provisions of the Act, for example, an ORC Biosecurity Officer.

**Land occupier** — an occupier includes a person who physically occupies the place, whether they own it or not. For example, if you are renting a house owned by someone else who does not live on that property, you are the occupier. You can see more about the responsibilities of occupiers (including owners) in section 3.3.1 of the Regional Pest Management Plan 2019-2029.

**Signs** — any evidence of rabbits being present, such as burrows, scratchings or scat.