This case study, prepared for Tasmanian Wool producers, shows a mainland Merino Stud managing foxes as part of their whole farm management. It is derived from a candid interview with Bob and Mikala Walters of Middleview Merino Stud, Dalgety. The stud was particularly selected for its resemblance to much of the alpine midlands of Tasmania and Bob’s strong involvement in the highly successful local Landcare group fox baiting. I spent a sunny afternoon with the Walters on one of the stud’s properties, “Springvale”. The enterprise is brilliant and Bob’s well informed knowledge on foxes and baiting is amazing.

Suzy Balogh, Agricultural Protection Officer, NSW Agriculture

Middleview Merino Stud is just south of the historic town of Dalgety, which is situated on the Monaro Plains, in the rain shadow of the Snowy Mountains. Dalgety is a relatively dry area of rolling hills with granite boulders scattered across the landscape. The countryside is alpine and similar to many areas of the midlands of Tasmania - cleared expanses fringed by rough country and bush covered hills.

The stud is fine wool based originally on Merryville lines and runs 10,000 sheep, 600 prime lambs and 250 breeding cows on the collective 9,000 acres. About 400 stud rams are sold annually, of these approximately 70 are sold into Tasmania and 200 into Victoria.

“Coke”, Bob Walters and his son Brody 4 years old and already the assistant manager. Typical Monaro landscape, pen wind swept plains.

“Lamb in spring, for the fertility, so you are working with mother nature not against it, winter is too hard as its knocks the poor ewe around”

Fox Territories

Foxes are territorial, they set up an area which they range over, hunt and scavenge in and defend. The size of territories is dependent on the available food resources and den sites within them.

By nature foxes are extremely competitive and jealous and are always either trying to get the best territory they can or defend the good one they have got. When a fox is removed from a territory by baiting, shooting or another method, that territory will quickly be filled by a fox seeking a territory of their own. This immigration can potentially occur overnight or within weeks.

To combat this continual immigration of foxes, a baiting program should take place over a large area and over several weeks. Baits should be regularly checked and those that are taken by foxes replaced as to poison any new foxes moving in.

Territories can range from 30 to 500 ha, however foxes will travel 10 km in an evening. Strategic group baiting will cover more fox territories providing a longer lasting buffer from fox predation.

HELPING TO CONTROL AUSTRALIA’S MAIN PREDATOR THREATENING WILDLIFE AND AGRICULTURE. OUT FOX II FARM NOTE - ISSUE 2 ‘MIDDLEVIEW’
Strategic Group Fox Baiting

Middleview has been strategically baiting foxes for 8 years. They have been group baiting for the last 4 years with the local Snowy River Landcare Group Inc. The group began as just five neighbours but has since grown to 37 landholders, covering some 80,000 acres.

“Most people have sheep but certainly everyone gets involved, even people with no stock at all, some of the hobby farmers, just purely for the environmental thing. As soon as you mention all the little birds and lizards that foxes eat, everyone wants to get involved”

The Fox Diet

A fox weighs about 3kg to 5kg and will consume 1/10th of their body weight a day. They are renowned opportunistic hunters and scavengers. They will eat whatever is seasonally available; lambs, blackberries, locusts, worms, mice, small native animals, ground dwelling birds and carrion.

“In winter when things get tight you’ll see foxes eating berries off briar bushes and digging alongside old stumps and posts trying to find grubs, its amazing what a fox actually eats”

“We see the foxes running straight up tree hollows getting at the birds eggs; they don’t just get the easy prey like frogs and lizards but birds too”

Bob has been Chairman of the local Landcare group for many years and has been a driving force behind the group fox baiting. The fox baiting and Snowy River Landcare Group Inc. link has been a wise partnership, bolstering Landcare membership as well as protecting agriculture and the environment. For around $20 Landcare membership landholders receive free fox baits for this group baiting. Funds also come from savings from other Landcare projects in this local area.

Landcare Coordinator for the Upper Snowy, Rosie Chapman, said that,

“Foxes are an issue with everyone who has sheep, and control is far more effective as a coordinated approach. The fox baiting has really opened up peoples’ eyes to Landcare not just being for the environment but that it can actually do some good for their properties”.

... getting rid of foxes just has to be a great benefit to the wildlife in the area”.

The group baiting is timed for the harsh winters of the snowy plains, throughout June and July. Bob says, “In winter the foxes are hungry and more susceptible to taking the baits, they need that extra food all the time to keep their body weight up”

“Some people lamb earlier than us and because such a large area is baited with a big group, the baits need to go out before the first property starts to lamb”

“1080 is a good effective way of controlling foxes”

The baits are all delivered to a central location, all the 1080 warning signs go up and all the dogs are restrained at that time. Any dog work is timed for before the baits go out.

“Foxes are hungry enough at that time of the year to eat just about anything. The group uses both Fox-Off® and lambs tongues”

Other bait types can be used such as fresh meat, liver, hearts, chicken heads, dried kangaroo meat and chicken wingettes.

“Certainly lambs tongues are very effective as bait, as that’s what the foxes eat. If a lot of lambs are on the ground, and a bad fox is around he will kill the lambs and then only eat their tails and tongues leaving the rest.”

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“Certainly lambs tongues are very effective as bait, as that’s what the foxes eat. If a lot of lambs are on the ground, and a bad fox is around he will kill the lambs and then only eat their tails and tongues leaving the rest.”
“It is an individual thing on how often baits are checked, we replacement bait at hot spots, where baits are always taken, such as holes in the netting fences, where there is lots of animal traffic or near a carcass”

Benefits from Group Fox Baiting

- Foxes depleted over a greater area
- Longer protection against fox attack
- The rate of reinvasion by foxes is decreased
- All neighbours dogs are restrained at the same time
- Individual properties need to use less baits
- Costs are minimised
- The time spent baiting will be shorter as more foxes are removed at the same time
- Baits are in the paddock working 24 hours a day over a greater area
- A better kill rate is achieved
- Often people who would not normally participate such as small landholders will become involved to be a good neighbour

To ensure the maximum lamb survival Middleview Merino Stud carries out a second light baiting just prior to their lambing. Since this program of twice a year fox baiting, lamb loss by fox predation has been virtually nil.

“After the baiting no foxes are seen again until February/ March where a few will sneak in from other areas”

Fox Impacts on Wildlife

Middleview is only 4 km from Kosciuszko National Park. Key threatened species occur in and around the park. Most of these species are susceptible to predation or pressure from competition and habitat disturbance by the fox. Some of those local species are:

- Southern Corroboree Frog (Pseudophryne corroboree)
- Olive Whistler (Pachycephala olivacea)
- Eastern Pygmy-possum (Cercartetus nanus)
- Spotted-tailed Quoll (Dasyurus maculatus)
- Broad-toothed Rat (Mastacomys fuscus)

“Even if the native animals are not endangered, we still don't want to see them lost from the area because of some lousy fox”

Fox Dens

Foxes are born in spring. The vixen will give birth to 4-6 cubs in a den. She may have several dens available to her during this time; if the den is disturbed or becomes fouled she will pick the cubs up in her mouth and transfer them to another of her dens. The father supports the young family by bringing back food to the vixen and cubs. To humanely destroy the vixen and cubs, Dencofume®, a carbon monoxide product registered for fox den fumigation is very effective.

“We don't see too many dens, but where they are, quite often foxes will just take over wombat holes, old hollow logs, rocky knolls and cracks in granite”

Lamb losses

“Prior to fox baiting our losses on Middleview were in the 4-5% range, mostly new born lambs. There is not much trouble once the lambs are up and going, the problem was particularly with twins, whilst the ewe was down having the second lamb the foxes were in there eating the first lamb”

“While the fox is killing the lamb or eating it the stress on the onlooking mother must be pretty great”

Genetic Loss

“Some producers lose 5% of lambs, that’s 5% of sheep they haven’t got. Sheep breeding is a numbers game; you need numbers working for you not against you. So with 5% loss of lambs, the culling rate will also be dropped by 5%, due to this inferior sheep are probably being let into flocks, when they shouldn’t be”
Stock Losses

“Considering females are kept for 5 years, they will have four lambs, so each ewe is worth about $600-$700 each, a ram lamb could be between $1000 to $20,000 dollars”

If a stud like Middleview were losing 5% of lambs on a flock of 1,000 ewes, that is a loss of 50 lambs (25 females @ $600 = $15,000, 25 males @ $5000 = $125,000). The loss from 50 lambs for a stud runs into tens of thousands of dollars.

“The saddest thing is when you see a dead lamb, knowing that it could have been a prize ram lamb for that year and it is just wasted.” Mikala Walters

Diseases

Foxes carry a number of important diseases and parasites, some affecting pets, wildlife and humans.

“Foxes stomachs are just like dogs, therefore they spread all the worms that a dog can spread, along with the potential to spread distemper, and parvovirus too”

Hydatids, mange, leptospirosis, toxoplasmosis and canine hepatitis are some of the other diseases and parasites foxes carry. Foxes could also be hosts for some strains of rabies if it were introduced into Australia. Foxes could also be implicated in spreading stock diseases such as footrot and Ovine Johnes Disease by transporting dead lambs from one property to another for eating or caching.

Nuisance

“The foxes tease the dogs, the dogs will be barking and barking and the fox will be eating the biscuits the dog can’t quite reach on the end of the chain” Mikala Walters

“Humans don't really bother a fox. A young hungry fox, a cheeky bugger, trotted straight past us and straight to the pup’s bowl”

Poultry kills

“Everyone who has got chooks certainly has to lock them up; the neighbours lost 28 chooks in one night. The gate just wasn’t shut properly” Mikala Walters

“It’s hard to sum up all the damage that foxes do as a lot of it you don’t actually see” Bob Walters

Remember

Group baiting is recommended since foxes are known to rapidly recolonise a small treated area post-baiting often returning to pre-baiting densities within weeks. Undertaking control in surrounding properties allows a ‘buffer’ zone around the property, reducing the speed of immigration and hence affording a longer period of protection from fox predation.

“Honestly if you haven't got foxes you don't want them as they are bad news all round”

Text by Suzy Balogh, NSW Agriculture
Bob and Mikala Walters, “Middleview” Merino Stud
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Infrastructure and Natural Resources.