



Feral goats

Animal pests

Goats were introduced to New Zealand in the early days of European settlement for food and weed control on developing land. The descendants of those that escaped or were deliberately released thrived in the country's grass hills, forest and scrubland areas. Today feral goats (*Capra hircus*) are on all three main islands and several offshore islands. They vary in size and colour; they can be white, brown or black, or any combination of these. They are mainly short-haired but can be shaggy on their hindquarters. Males may have a beard and shaggy mane of hair, with broad-curved horns. Nanny goat's horns are slender, hooked spikes. Feral goats are classified as wild animals under the Wild Animal Control Act 1977.

Where are they found?

Feral goats are found in almost every type of habitat - from peaty moorland of sub-antarctic islands to subtropical forest on Raoul Island. They range from sea level to the alpine zone, living in introduced and native grasslands, scrub and forest.

Because they are browsers, their preferred habitat

is forest or scrub-covered upland. They are agile on steep crags and narrow ledges and can get to areas that deer can not reach. They like sunny sides of slopes, making use of open places close to the shelter of forest or scrub.



Why are they a problem?

New Zealand's native plants evolved during 80 million years of isolation without any large mammal browsers. This makes them particularly vulnerable to damage.

Herding browsers such as goats cause two-fold damage by eating native plants and by trampling large areas of vegetation and compactable soils.

Goats will eat the foliage of most trees and plants and quickly destroy all vegetation within their reach, eating seedlings, saplings and litter-fall off the forest floor. They do however have strong preferences and will eat out those favoured species first such as broadleaf/pāpāuma (*Griselinia littoralis*) and māhoe (*Melicytus ramiflorus*) before moving on to less desirable plants. Goats will also strip bark off trees and by eating young seedlings, they effectively puts a stop to forest regeneration.

Why are they here?

Goats arrived here as early as 1773, when Captain James Cook released them ashore in the Marlborough Sounds during his second voyage to New Zealand. Early explorers, whalers, sealers and settlers bought goats with them for food, and used them to barter with Māori.

During the late nineteenth century – early twentieth, goats were released onto outlying islands to provide a food source for castaways. Angora goats were introduced about the same time to develop an industry for their fine wool, which never really took off.

As land around the country was 'developed', weeds

such as gorse, blackberry and briar invaded and goats were brought in to eat the weeds.

Feral goats now occupy about 14% of New Zealand –about half of this on public conservation land. Total population size is unknown but is estimated to be several hundred thousand.

What is being done?

Government control operations of feral goats began in the 1930s in areas where goats competed with sheep for available grazing. These days, goat control is targeted at areas where their browsing threatens rare native plants or damages the forest understorey. Goats have been eradicated from 15 of the 20 offshore islands they were established on.

Goat control operations today are based on the values at each site, feasibility of control/eradication and other conservation management activities happening at the site.

Aerial culling and ground hunting operations using dogs are good control methods when there are high numbers of goats, but as their numbers are reduced and pockets of elusive animals are left, costs rise dramatically.

At low densities, any remaining goats become difficult to locate and control. In these situations, a goat is caught, fitted with a radio-collar and released back into the area. This animal – known as a Judas – then hopefully joins up with any remaining mob of goats, allowing the hunter to locate and shoot the mob. Judas use in the last 20 years has led to more effective tracking, reduced hunting costs, lower populations as well as a better understanding of these pests. Indicator dogs are also used to locate goats in some cases.

How can you help?

If you see wild goats in areas where control is being carried out, let the local Department of Conservation know. For example, a joint control programme being carried out on Banks Peninsula in Canterbury is relying on sightings to pick off the last goats in this area.

For more information

Contact your local DOC office or visit the DOC website at www.doc.govt.nz

Further reading

Handbook of NZ Mammals, edited by Carolyn M King, 2nd Edition 2005, Oxford University Press.

Did you know?

Goats are very nimble and will climb out on branches or stand on hind legs to reach leaves up to 2 metres high! They are very inquisitive and will constantly 'test' out plants to see if they are worth eating. When necessary, goats can survive on whatever is available and if gorse is all there is – that's what they will eat!

Judas goat P. Hondelink

