

Enter the commentators

And, hast thou slain the Jabberwock?
Come to my arms, my beamish boy!

Lewis Carroll, 'Jabberwocky', 1872

Although research on rabbit fleas and subsequently RHDV was of central importance, it was not carried out in isolation or without communicating our plans to the wider community. As the release of rabbit fleas had become more likely and the idea of introducing RHD into Australia was being discussed in greater detail, it was important to keep rabbits and the problems they caused well to the fore in the public mind and on the political agenda.

The rural press was always keen to write something on progress with the 'arid-adapted' Spanish rabbit fleas. This was often done with a humorous twist, and one Adelaide newspaper even had a cartoon showing a scientist examining a flea that was about to be released into the Australian desert. The flea was wearing a sombrero and carrying water canteens and the fact that it was more Mexican than Spanish hadn't apparently concerned the cartoonist too much. But something more was needed to make sure the general public was aware that rabbits were not only an economic problem for farmers and graziers but also a major ecological problem.

Suddenly, word came that a rabbit plague was building up in the desert sand-hill country of South Australia's far north-eastern border region. Dog-fence inspectors and pastoralists confirmed the story. Rabbits had become so numerous that they had eaten all the succulent vegetation they could find and were dying of hunger and thirst. Many were driven to climb into bushes and shrubs to reach leaves and moist bark, and some even hunted grasshoppers and moths for the moisture and fat they contained.

The chance of recording a severe rabbit plague was an opportunity not to be missed. Before myxomatosis was introduced, plagues of rabbits had been commonly observed and stories about them were legendary, but few people realised that such events were again possible as rabbits increased their resistance to that disease. Some graphic images of a plague would be invaluable in bringing home the fact that rabbits were again a problem. Photos showing starving rabbits would be newsworthy enough to keep rabbits on the political agenda – much better than any scientific publication or official government information sheet.

Greg Mutze, Peter Bird and I quickly organised a trip to Quinyambie cattle station but, before we left, we tried to encourage a film crew from the Adelaide studios of the Australian Broadcasting Corporation to accompany us. The crew was willing but in the end another story, about a pensioner who had been robbed, won the day. We similarly failed to attract interest from any of the commercial television companies. As a result, we set out with a couple of ordinary 35 mm film cameras and a small, borrowed video camera. The video camera produced very poor, grainy images by today's digital standards. With our swags, provisions and extra fuel we were crammed into a short-wheelbase Toyota Land Cruiser 4WD meant