

From Kitchen to countryside – the journey of Aris Sertarides

In 1788 the First Fleet arrived at Botany Bay, carrying 5 rabbits in its cargo. Raised in cages, rabbits were an integral part of the domestic food markets in Sydney and Melbourne. These markets were transformed in the mid-nineteenth century when wild rabbits became established – and the rest is history.

For all the damage rabbits have done to this country, they also provided good tucker to many Australians for about ninety years until the successful introduction of myxo. There was of course always a tension between farmers who wanted to be rid of every last rabbit and the trappers who wanted to sustain the breeding population – in other words, to farm the rabbits. Whatever the ambition, over nine decades there was plenty of opportunity to develop and test rabbit recipes.

What has this to do with Aris Sertarides? Well, Aris was 15 years a chef in Geelong with ample opportunities to explore and value *la cuisine délicieuses de lapin*. But fate intruded when Aris took a course in land management to find that his real passion was local flora and fauna. This led him to the [Bellarine Landcare Group](#) with its active interest in revegetation and natural regeneration. Inevitably these ambitions are thwarted by rabbits unless there is a large investment in tree guards or netting fences – the Bellarine is after all just downstream from Winchelsea where Thomas Austin gave Australia it's infamous Christmas gift in 1859.



It was not that long ago that the Bellarine Peninsular was open grazing land behind a scattering of coastal villages. Today it is boutique wineries, craft breweries, B&B, farm gate, and hobby farms often occupied only on weekends. Rabbits are of course a regional problem and control is particularly difficult as so many landholders have to be involved. While the individual properties might be relatively small, there are lots of them.

In 2020 Aris took part in the [Victorian Rabbit Action Network](#) (VRAN) rabbit control boot camp, subsequently joining the Bellarine Rabbit Action Group ('the Rabbiter's'). This is a sub-group of the Bellarine Landcare Group, which takes an active role in organising rabbit control field days, webinars, and other educational events, and supports landholders with advice and some working bees on rabbit control.

Aris now works with the Bellarine rural community using the VRAN principles to 'provide the tools and networks to enable community, industry and government to implement best practice management in the control feral rabbits'. VRAN run training and mentoring programs, deliver workshops on best-practice rabbit control, and support people and organisations to collaborate on rabbit action. A key aim of the course is for participants to become a local 'go to' person on rabbit management'. Aris is one of those.

The nature of the Bellarine, with its large number of small properties, poses its own unique problems. Biological control (e.g. Calicivirus) can impact rabbits on a regional scale, but in most instances a fifty percent 'strike rate' is about as much as one can expect. Netting boundary fences can isolate the problem to individual properties, but this is a costly prospect that also restricts the migration of other small animals. VRAN strongly advocates networking where members get together to exchange ideas, share challenges, seek feedback on programs and provide a deeper understanding of how complex rabbit management can be.

A key to Aris's work is the Bellarine Landcare Group through which he can use an already established network to educate and inform landholders. This can involve individuals or small groups, using successful case studies as role models. To date the main tactics have involved mapping, ripping and fumigating warrens, along with netting fences to protect high value crops.

The Landcare Group has developed an [affordable smoking kit](#) that members can purchase and has subsidised landholders to undertake training for an Agricultural Chemical User Permit (ACUP). Whilst Aris then provides the advice on fumigation, the responsibility still rests with the landholder.

To date there has been limited success with RHDV (calicivirus), but Aris is now providing education on the safe use of Pindone through pamphlets, webinars and workshops as part of an integrated best practice rabbit control program.



Rabbit-proof fencing can be an option in peri-urban areas.

Compiled by Bruce Munday, 2022