



## Are foxes killing your lambs?

### Farmnote 62/2001

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*By staff of Vertebrate Pest Research Section, Forrestfield*

Many surveys, based on post mortem examination of lamb carcasses both in Western Australia and elsewhere, have shown that foxes kill and eat very few healthy lambs. However, there are exceptions to this general rule.

It is essential that killing by foxes is properly diagnosed, since preoccupation with the idea that foxes routinely kill large numbers of lambs can obscure the fact that there are many other and usually more important causes of lamb losses. This may lead to these other problems being overlooked.

Observations have shown that ewes are very little disturbed by the presence of several foxes in the paddock, in sharp contrast to their panic when dogs are there. A healthy ewe and even some lambs are perfectly capable of seeing off most foxes.

Studies of fox stomachs show that most of the sheep material was dead or very sickly when eaten. Carrion and placentas make up a large proportion of fox stomach contents at lambing.

That said, some farms may be plagued by killer foxes which take a large number of healthy lambs. Certainly some lamb losses are due to fox attacks, although most deaths are attributable to disease, mismothering and starvation.

If lamb deaths are excessive on a property and there is no obvious disease or management problem, predation can be checked out by answering in turn the following questions.

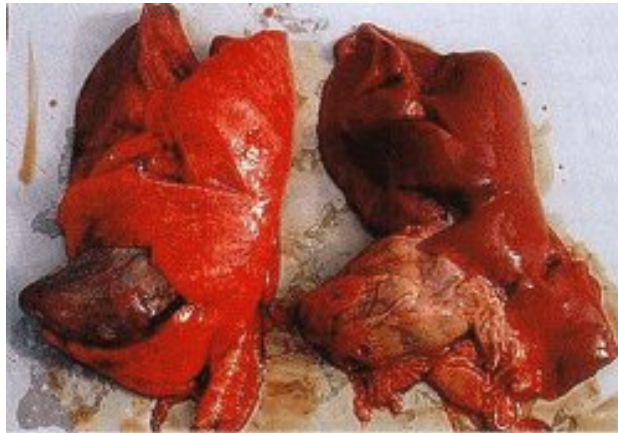
**Question 1:** Have adult sheep been killed or severely injured? If so, dingoes or domestic dogs should be suspected.

**Question 2:** Has the carcass been eaten or mutilated in any way? Feral pigs, birds of prey, feral cats, foxes, domestic and wild dogs and dingoes could all be the cause.

**Question 3:** Has the carcass been almost entirely consumed, except for some bones and skin? Feral pigs clean up nearly the whole carcass.

**Question 4:** Has the attack been mainly to eyes, mouth, navel, nose or anus? If so, it was probably due to a bird of prey.

**Question 5:** Has the lamb breathed? Examination of the lung will show a clear difference between a lung which has been aerated; it is pink and healthy, against one which has not been used, which is dark and liverish in colour (Plate 1).



*Plate 1. Fat reserves round heart metabolised (left) and unmetabolised (right) with lungs aerated (left) and not aerated (right).*

**Question 6:** Has the lamb walked? Lambs are born with protective membranes over the hooves which are rapidly lost when they walk (Plate 2).



*Plate 2. Feet of new-born lamb with membranes (left) and after walking (right).*

**Question 7:** Are there any signs of bleeding? If so the lamb was alive when it was attacked.

**Question 8:** Has the lamb used any of its fat reserves? In normal lambs the fat round the heart and kidneys is firm, white and lacking in obvious blood vessels. When lamb fails to feed these fat

reserves become soft, gelatinous and dark plum red in colour (Plate 1).

**Question 9:** Has the lamb fed? Is there any milk in its stomach (Plate 3).



*Plate 3. Stomach cut open to show food residues.*

**Question 10:** Is food present in the small intestine (Plate 4)? This indicates normal feeding. The absence of food indicates starvation



*Plate 4. Intestine cut open to show food residues.*

Dogs and foxes kill in broadly similar ways usually attacking the neck and head. Their kills are difficult to distinguish from each other. However, foxes frequently attack from beneath and a dog from above. Foxes usually bit the tongue out of carcasses and often the lower jaw.

Foxes never attack adult sheep and are not strong enough to crush the skull or spine. Their teeth marks are also somewhat smaller than those of most dogs.

## Further information

Contact any office of the Department of Agriculture and Food, email [info@agric.wa.gov.au](mailto:info@agric.wa.gov.au) or visit [www.agric.wa.gov.au](http://www.agric.wa.gov.au).

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