

# GREENKEEPERS ON THE HOP

**H**ow many holes are there on your course? Are there 9 or 18 – or perhaps the number could even be 1,237? If it's the last figure, then it is likely that your handicap is rabbits. Rabbits are increasing in number throughout the country, mainly due to the waning effects of myxomatosis. Although it is difficult to be precise, it is estimated that rabbit numbers are currently about a third of what they were before myxomatosis arrived and that this number may well double in the coming years as the effects of the disease continue to decrease. Eventually it may kill none. Therefore the message is that problems with rabbits are likely to become more common and more severe.

## Problems

One of the most obvious problems which rabbits can cause for greenkeepers is by digging burrows. Many of you may recall the article in this magazine on last year's Open Championship (July 1992, Page 18) in which Chris Whittle, the course manager at Muirfield, described the scale of his rabbit problem where a tee which had been undermined by burrows collapsed when a tractor drove on to it! As if burrows dug into tees were not bad enough, burrows dug into the sides of greens are likely to please even less and there may even be the possibility of claims for compensation if someone breaks an ankle in a burrow hidden in the rough. Then there are also the smaller, shallow scrapes with which to contend. Rabbits seem to love to dig these on fairway grass and these rabbit 'divots' seem to have a magnetic attraction for golf balls, although relief may, of course, be taken under the rules of golf. Last but not least there is the problem of rabbits damaging or killing newly planted young trees on the course and these can be very expensive to replace.

## Why do rabbits love golf courses?

Many courses provide ideal habitats for rabbits. There can be a mixture of scrub cover, thick rough or woodland in which rabbits can shelter. From these areas, rabbits can move out to the fairways to feed on the shorter grass, which they prefer to the longer grass of the rough. Populations are higher on sandy soil than on heavier soil types, mainly because young rabbits survive better when rain water can drain freely through their burrows, rather than on heavier soils where waterlogged burrows means cold and damp rabbits. Therefore it is not surprising that many links courses, such as Muirfield, have the worst problems.

## Solutions

Under the 1954 Pests Act it remains the legal obligation of occupiers of land to take reasonable steps to destroy wild rabbits on their land or to prevent rabbits from causing damage on adjoining land. Unfortunately, however, there is no simple solution to the problem. There are a range of management methods which can be used. Numbers can be reduced by gassing rabbits in their burrows, by ferreting, trapping or shooting.

Tree guards can be used to protect individual trees and fencing can be erected to exclude rabbits.

bits from the course.

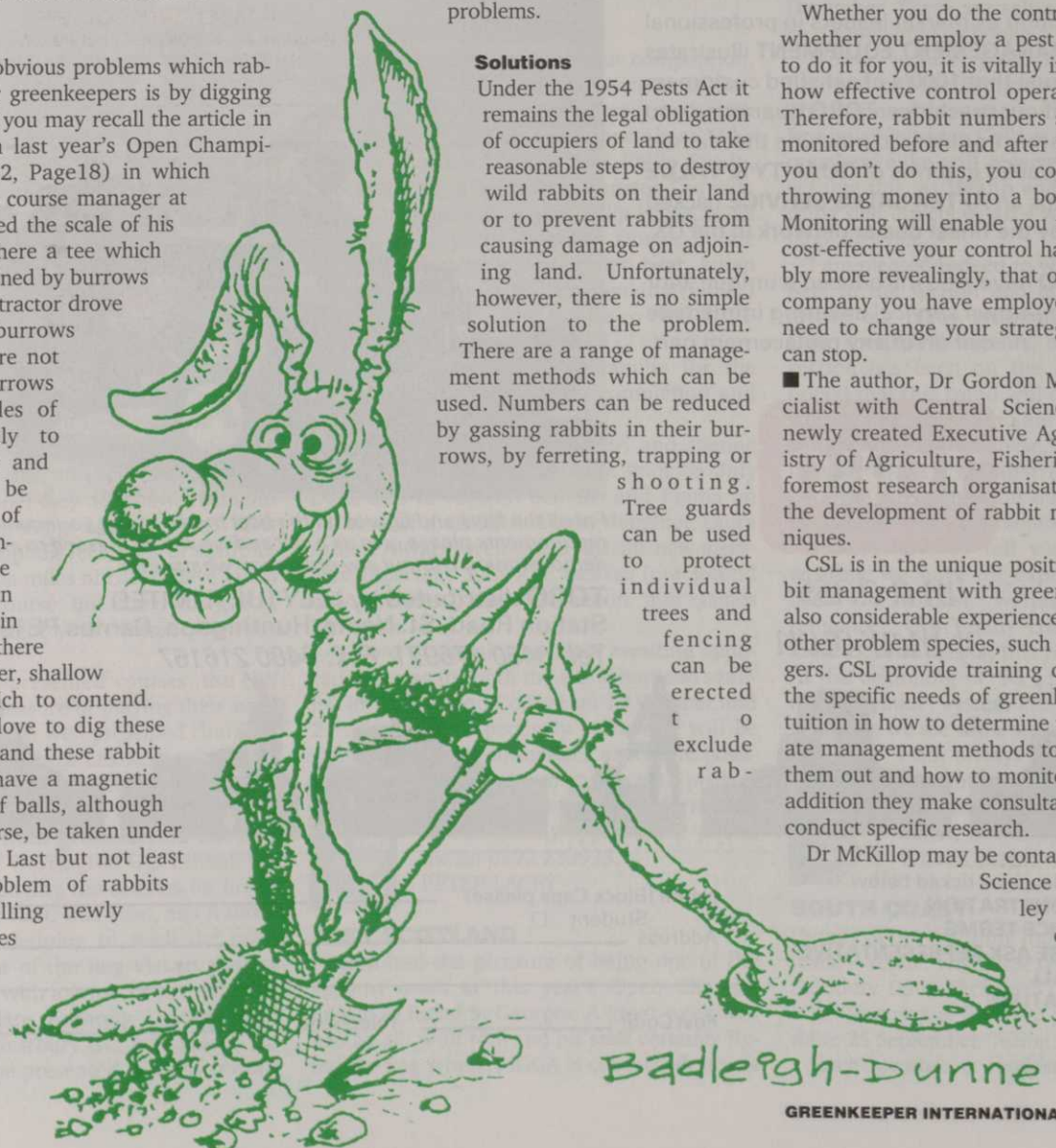
The best results are achieved during winter (November-March), usually by using a combination of these techniques with choice being determined by the particular circumstances. Winter is the best time to initiate a management campaign, because rabbit numbers are at their lowest at this time of year due to natural mortality. Anything done by man before winter will only replace rather than add to this mortality. Also, control at this time of year will reduce the breeding population before the next breeding season begins in January-February and therefore there will be fewer young around that year.

Whether you do the controlling yourself or whether you employ a pest control company to do it for you, it is vitally important to know how effective control operations have been. Therefore, rabbit numbers should always be monitored before and after each operation. If you don't do this, you could well end up throwing money into a bottomless burrow! Monitoring will enable you to determine how cost-effective your control has been (or, possibly more revealingly, that of the pest control company you have employed), whether you need to change your strategy and when you can stop.

■ The author, Dr Gordon McKillop, is a specialist with Central Science Laboratory, a newly created Executive Agency of the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, the foremost research organisation in the UK for the development of rabbit management techniques.

CSL is in the unique position to discuss rabbit management with greenkeepers and has also considerable experience and expertise on other problem species, such as moles and badgers. CSL provide training courses tailored to the specific needs of greenkeepers, including tuition in how to determine the most appropriate management methods to use, how to carry them out and how to monitor effectiveness. In addition they make consultancy visits and will conduct specific research.

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