



Department of Agriculture and Food

# Farmnote

## Recognising wild dog and dingo predation

### Farmnote 124/2000

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Producers need to be able to recognise the cause of stock losses as a first step to reducing them. Some losses such as those brought about by general harassment, mis-mothering and so on cannot be easily measured. While such damage may be considerable, it falls outside the scope of this article which deals with recognising dingo damage to sheep found dead or injured.

The information presented is based on research conducted by the Agriculture Protection Board on dingoes in the north-west pastoral region (Mardie Station).

Because there is a wide range of behavioural responses probably determined largely by the experience of the attacker and its motivation - hunger or 'playing' - there is no certain way to distinguish between dingo and domestic or feral dog attacks. Therefore much of this discussion applied equally well to damage by dogs.

## Carcasses found

### 1. Sheep more than six month old

The following information should be sought:

#### **Signs**

Depending on the type of ground and the amount of time elapsed since the attack, tracks may be found indicating a struggle. Both the dingo and its prey often leave deep prints with toes spread out. Freshly broken vegetation, often bolding tufts of wool, is sometimes found at the site of the attack. Pieces of wool with patches of torn skin attached, as well as blood trails, are good indicators of dingo predation.

Often however, scavengers obscure the tracks and other signs. The presence of dingo tracks at a carcass does not necessarily mean predation was the cause of death, particularly if the tracks are more recent than that of the carcass.

#### **Preliminary carcass details**

It is important to note the position of the carcass - sheep dying from natural causes usually die in shady places, sometimes near water. A carcass found out in the open, away from available

shade can point towards predation. In the same way, the age and condition of the sheep can give a clue to predation - often young and apparently healthy sheep are found dead, leading to suspicion of predator attacks.

### **Carcass examination**

Dingoes generally kill by bites to the throat, this damages the trachea and the major blood vessels of the neck. Blood on the throat is therefore good evidence of dingo predation. Blood is often found at the mouth and nose, although care should be taken to distinguish blood here from other body fluids which drain from a decomposing carcass (Figure 1).



*Figure 1. Ewe killed by dingoes.*

*Note blood on ground but little external damage apparent.*

Dingoes often attack sheep from behind as they run away, resulting in injury to the hind legs. Inexperienced dingoes, or those attacking 'for fun' frequently inflict considerable damage to the hind end of the sheep. This often leads to its death. In these cases, blood is often found caked on the hind legs. The pattern made by blood flowing down the legs while the sheep was still upright can be clearly distinguished from blood or fluids which may flow as a result of feeding or decomposition or animals feeding on a carcass (Figure 2).



*Figure 2. Sheep attacked at hind end.*

*Note pattern of blood flow which took place when sheep was standing.*

Dingoes' saliva, even when dry, can sometimes be seen on the wool of attacked sheep.

Simple skinning of the throat and hind legs is often sufficient to reveal hidden damage. Tooth punctures in the hide, subcutaneous haemorrhage, bruising and tissue damage will indicate dingo involvement (Figure 3).



*Figure 3. Skinning revealing tooth punctures, haemorrhage and tissue damage, clearly distinguishable from undamaged portions of the carcass.*

External signs of tissue damage due to feeding or scavenging activities can be readily confirmed in a fresh carcass by such simple dissection. Tissue damage caused after death will show no haemorrhage; this only occurs if the animal is bitten while still alive.

Decomposition and/or scavenger damage can mask the cause of death in older carcasses. Often however, blood-stained wool still remains (especially on the lower legs which often dry out intact). Again care must be taken to ensure that decomposition fluids are not mistaken for blood.

Depending on the carcasses age, dissection is often warranted, as bruised tissue can still be distinguished from undamaged tissue in a decomposing carcass. Provided that the skin is still intact, damage can often be revealed by simply pulling out the wool. Puncture wounds in the throat may be uncovered in this manner (Figure 4).



*Figure 4. Tooth punctures and bruising revealed in a decomposing carcass by pulling out neck wool.*

## **2. Sheep younger than six months**

There are no predators in Australia apart from dingoes or dogs that are large enough to inflict the sort of damage to adult sheep just described. In the case of sheep younger than about six

months of age, however, the situation is often more complex.

Many young lambs die from causes other than predation, and predators are often suspected, as a result of scavenging on already dead or moribund lambs. To verify predation, dis-section must show haemorrhage and bruising as described for adult sheep (other methods can be used to determine whether the lamb was healthy and likely to have survived in the absence of predation).

A further complicating factor in relation to lambs is that predators other than dingoes could be involved. While the incidence of fox attacks on healthy lambs has been found to be much lower than was generally believed, there are occasions when it does occur. Apart from other signs (tracks, scats, damage to adult sheep in the area) it can be difficult to distinguish between fox and dingo predation on lambs. The size of bites and puncture marks probably provide the most reliable guide.

Although foxes often tend to feed from the heads of lambs, there are variation in the behaviour of both individual foxes and dingoes which sometimes make definite predator identification difficult.

## Injured sheep found

Injured sheep are sometimes found in areas where dingoes are active. Sheep that have been bitten often drift towards the rear of a mob, and can frequently be seen hobbling behind. They sometimes remain close to water, though if the injuries are bad enough they may not be able to move at all.

Sheep showing signs of injury should be examined for bite marks and blood, particularly on the hind parts. As mentioned above, dingoes often bite the hindquarters, causing easily identified injuries. Rams use their horns to deter dingoes from frontal attacks, they therefore suffer more rear attacks than other sheep. A torn scrotum or sometimes even complete castration may be found (Figure 5).



*Figure 5. Ram with damaged scrotum following dingo attack*

Damage to the head or neck area of sheep usually results in their quick death, so almost invariably animals found with these injuries are already dead. Any doubts about the cause of bad injuries can be easily solved by post mortem examination.

Few sheep recover from severe dingo-inflicted injuries; blood loss, shock, infection and inhibited movement are probably the most important factors in later death (Figure 6).



*Figure 6. This sheep was severely injured by dingo attack and would not have survived.*

Occasionally, however, sheep bearing scars from dingo attacks are discovered, particularly at shearing (Figure 7).



*Figure 7. Scrotum of ram showing scars from a previous dingo attack.*

Care should be taken to distinguish bite marks and tears from shearing or wire scars, though dingo damage is usually easily recognised.

Injured lambs are rarely found, as they seldom survive a dingo attack

**For further information contact the Agriculture Protection Board, Jarrah Road, South Perth, WA 6151. Telephone (08) 9367 0111 or any country office of the APB or Agriculture Western Australia.**

## Further reading

- Farmnote 133/2000 ['Dingo'](#)

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