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Brushtail possum

Detering possums

Block all potential access points to the roof except for the entry point that a possum has been observed using. Useful materials include sheet metal, vinyl, wood or wire netting with a mesh size smaller than 20mm, which should be fitted securely and snugly to prevent the animal from getting a claw hold and lifting the cover off the hole. Bricks are not recommended, as possums are strong and have been known to loosen mortar or move loose bricks aside. It may also be necessary to trim or remove trees that provide access.

After dusk the possum will leave the roof to go in search of food, at which stage the remaining entry point can be permanently blocked. A feeding platform may be useful for encouraging possums to a convenient observation point to confirm that a possum has left the roof and it is safe to block off the last entry point. Pieces of fruit can be provided sparingly and only while attempting to exclude a possum from the roof.

Alternatively, fit a one-way flap made out of metal or perspex to allow the possum out but not in. Cover the flap surrounds with metal to prevent possum claws from gripping and lifting the flap. If the possum proves to be elusive, contact your local Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) office for advice.

To prevent access to the roof, sheet metal can be rolled into collars approximately 60cm wide and placed around the trunks of nearby trees at a height of about 60cm to prevent possums from climbing up. Branches overhanging the house can be trimmed.

Specially designed waterproof nest boxes can be placed in trees in the area to provide alternative nest sites or to encourage possums to live in the area. These may be simple hollow logs with one end blocked, or wooden box constructions, placed about 4m above the ground, perhaps in the fork of a tree, but facing south away from the sun. If available, possum droppings and nest material can be placed in the nest box to make it more inviting to possums. Taping a cockroach strip inside the nest box lid during spring will prevent invasion by bees.

The relocation of possums to other sites is not an acceptable option, since studies have shown that the survival rate of relocated possums is very low. Most are killed by foxes and dogs, or hit by cars while crossing roads in search of suitable territory.

The trapping and removal of possums from buildings should be a last resort and licenses are required from CALM for all such activities. If there appears to be no other alternative than to trap and remove a possum, contact your nearest CALM office to discuss the options available.

References

"Nest Boxes for Wildlife." Wildlife Notes No. 3, 1997. *Land for Wildlife*, Perth.

Written by E. Bramwell, C. Kemp and P. Orell, CALM.

Artwork by Louise Burch.

Department of Conservation and Land Management, WA.

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For more information

Contact *Land for Wildlife*, phone (08) 9334 0427, or visit CALM's website www.naturebase.net

Living with possums



November 2005



Living with possums

The common brushtail possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) and, to a lesser extent, the western ringtail possum (*Pseudocheirus occidentalis*) are two native mammals that may be encountered in and around urban areas in the south-west of Western Australia. The western ringtail is listed as specially protected (threatened) under the Wildlife Conservation Act 1950.

The western ringtail is endemic to the south-west of WA and is mostly restricted to coastal areas between Bunbury and Albany, while the common brushtail is found in a wide range of habitats throughout Australia.

Biology

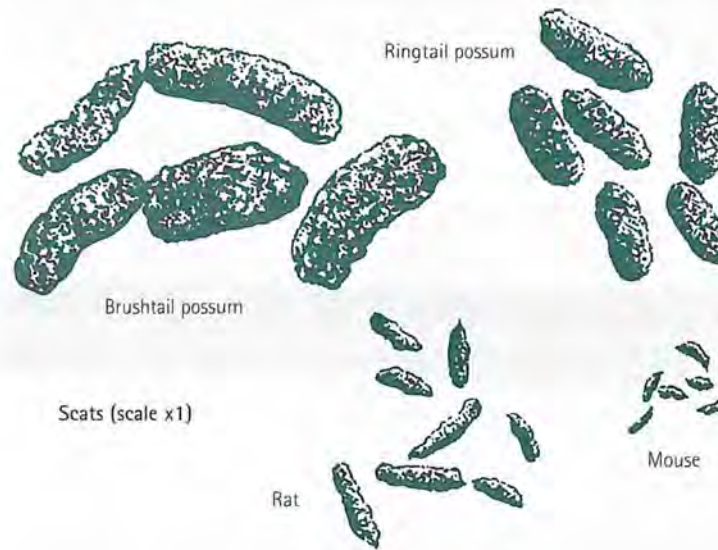
The western ringtail is about the size of a small cat, with soft, short fur of a charcoal-grey colour and a paler underbelly.

The common brushtail is larger and usually silver-grey in colour, though this can vary to charcoal-grey or brown. One obvious difference between the two species is the tail. The western ringtail has a long, slim tail with white at the end, while the common brushtail has a bushy tail with a furless strip underneath and either a black or a white tip.

Possums are mainly nocturnal, resting in tree hollows or similar refuges during the day and emerging shortly after sunset to forage for food.



Ringtail possum



Possums are mainly herbivorous, eating leaves, blossoms and fruits. In natural circumstances the diet of the western ringtail consists mostly of the foliage of trees including peppermint, jarrah and marri, while the common brushtail enjoys a wider diet including eucalypt, wattle and mistletoe foliage. In urban areas both species will readily eat fruit (apples, bananas, oranges etc) and many types of garden plants. They have a particular liking for rose buds and shoots. It is common for possums to rapidly defoliate garden trees such as oaks, in some cases almost eating them bare.

Habitat

Possums are strongly territorial, with males actively defending their home ranges by using a range of guttural noises and by marking boundaries with scent glands on their chin, chest and near the anus. Territory size is generally determined by the availability of food and suitable hollows or leafy nests (called dreys). A territory may be as small as an area of about 50 metres radius from a central location and may contain a number of nesting sites. The territory of a male possum may also be home to an adult female and juveniles of both sexes.

Common brushtails are solitary by nature, although during the breeding season it is possible to see a pair together. In urban areas possums may congregate in parks and gardens while feeding on food scraps. Western ringtails are quite social and up to 11 may occupy a home range that overlaps with the home ranges of other possums.

Breeding

Female possums breed once a year from the age of 12 months, usually at the end of autumn, although common brushtails have been known to breed twice a year, with a minor second breeding season in spring. Males are very active and mobile at this season, searching for mates from about April onwards. This is, sadly, often noticed because of an increase in the number of animals killed on the roads at this time.

A female will produce a single young (or occasionally twins) after a gestation period of about three weeks. The young possum spends about five months in the mother's pouch before riding on the mother's back for another two months until it is weaned, after which it leaves its parents to find its own territory.

Living with possums

Possums have adapted well to living in and around urban areas and often take refuge in roof cavities instead of tree hollows.

This is usually an annoying experience, since possums are very noisy at night and over long periods may produce unpleasant odours and urine stains in the ceiling. However, rats and mice may also inhabit roof spaces and create a disturbance, especially during the winter months.

If the roof cavity is accessible, the easiest way to determine whether it is a rat, mouse or possum that has taken up residence is to find some droppings. Those of a possum are by far the largest, being about 2cm long and about 1cm wide. In comparison, those from a rat or mouse are narrower and can be from less than 0.5cm to just over 1cm long (see diagram). The lingering smell of rats and mice is different to that of a possum.

As possums are territorial, the removal of one possum from the roof will only leave a vacant possum-smelling space for another to take up residence. By careful observation at night it should be possible to find the place that a possum uses to enter the roof and, once this has been found, possums can be discouraged from taking up residence.