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Those of a possum are by far the largest, being about 2cm long and about 1cm wide. In comparison, those of a rat or mouse can be from less than 0.5cm to just over 1cm long. The lingering smell of rats and mice is quite different to that of a possum, and possums do not chew on electrical wiring as rats and mice often do.

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 a roof, and once this has been found, possums can be discouraged from taking up residence.

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, 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 be necessary to trim or remove trees providing access as well.

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. However, if the possum proves to be elusive, it may be possible to trap it in the roof, and then release it outside the house – contact your local 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 them. Branches overhanging the house can be trimmed.

Specially designed waterproof nest boxes can be placed in trees around the area to provide alternative nests or to encourage possums to the area. These may be simple hollow logs with one end blocked, or wooden box constructions, placed about four metres 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

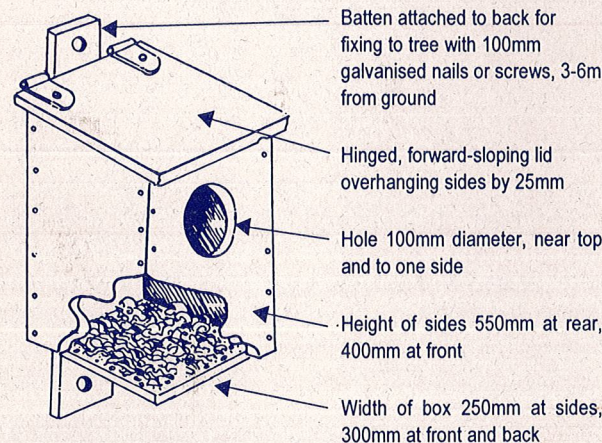
box to make it more inviting to possums. Taping a cockroach strip inside the nest box lid during spring will prevent invasion by bees.

Feeding platforms are another method to encourage possums away from the house, and providing that the correct food is supplied sparingly, such supplementary feeding should not adversely affect the animals.

The trapping and removal of possums by the general public is not recommended, and licences are required from the Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) for all such activities.

Possums released into new areas may displace other wildlife from nesting hollows. They may compete with other animals for food resources, and may be killed by cars, foxes and dogs in their new environment as they attempt to form their own territories. Hence, the survival rate of translocated possums is poor, but 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.

A basic possum nest box design

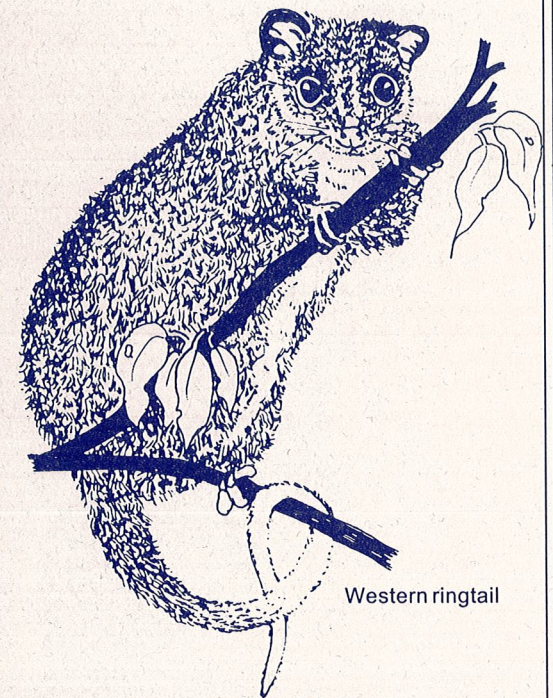


References

Nest Boxes for Wildlife. "Wildlife Notes" No.4 (January 1997) *Land for Wildlife*, Western Australia.

Prepared by C. Kemp & E. Bramwell, *Land for Wildlife*
 Possum artwork by Louise C. Burch, Graphic Designer
 Department of Conservation and Land Management WA, October 1999.

Living with Possums



Western ringtail



A joint initiative of *Land for Wildlife* and the
 Department of
 Conservation and Land Management
 Western Australia, October 1999.



Living with possums

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

The western ringtail is endemic to the southwest of Western Australia and restricted to coastal areas between Albany and Bunbury (see map), while the common brushtail possum 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 brown or silver colour, and a paler underbelly. The common brushtail possum is similar but larger. One obvious difference between the two species is the tail, which in the western ringtail is long and slim, and white at the end, and in the common brushtail is bushy on top with a furless strip underneath, and a black or white tip.

Possums are mainly nocturnal, and in natural circumstances they live in trees.



Common brushtail possum

Diet

Possums are mainly herbivorous, eating soft, new leaves, fruits and blossoms of the trees they inhabit, as well as the occasional insect. In natural circumstances the diet of the western ringtail consists mostly of the foliage of trees including peppermint (*Agonis flexuosa*), jarrah and marri, while the common brushtail possum enjoys a diet of eucalypt, wattle and mistletoe foliage. In urban areas both species will readily accept fruit (apples, bananas, oranges, etc.) and many types of flowering garden plants, with a particular liking for rose buds and shoots. It is quite common for possums to rapidly defoliate garden trees, in some cases almost eating them bare.

Habitat

Possums are strongly territorial, with males actively defending their home ranges 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 nesting site hollows or 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 possum may be home also to an adult female, and juveniles of both sexes.

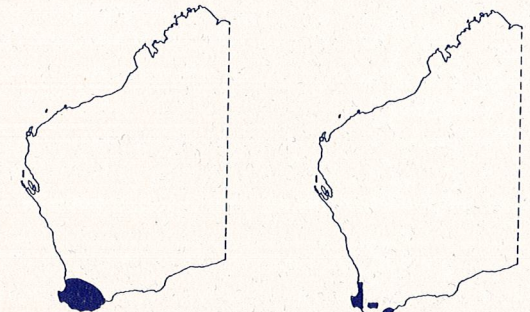
Common brushtail possums are solitary by nature, although during breeding season it is possible to see a pair together. In urban areas possums may congregate in parks and gardens while feeding on food scraps.

Western ringtails are quite social, and up to eleven 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 twelve months, usually at the end of autumn, although common brushtail possums have been known to breed twice a year, with a minor second breeding season in spring. Males are very active and mobile in this season, searching for mates from about April onwards. This is often noticeable by a marked increase in the number of roadkill animals observed at this time.

Former (left) and current (right) distribution of the western ringtail



Signs of possums



Brushtail possum scats (actual size)

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, with their apparent boldness and variable diet, have adapted to living in and around urban areas, and may lay claim to territories that include the roof space of a house.

A possum taking up residence in the roof space of a house can be an annoying experience, as they are nocturnal and may be heard moving around on the ceiling as they leave or return from foraging. However, rats and mice may also inhabit roof spaces and create a disturbance, especially during the winter months. The easiest way to determine whether it is a rat, mouse or possum that has taken up residence is to find some droppings.