

## FROM FAMINE TO FAME

These two engaging pygmy possums, nursed back to health after being abandoned by their parents, were photographed by CALM wildlife officer Ray Smith.

Last winter, Betty Avery of Scott River contacted animal carer Rita Watts of Busselton about a family of young pygmy possums that desperately required rearing.

The Averys do not keep cats on their farm and have put up nesting boxes around the house. One of the boxes, placed in a bushy yate, was taken over by pygmy possums and six babies were seen in the box. However, after several days the parents were no longer returning to feed the young.

The youngsters had only a thin covering of silky fur, had not developed ears, and were completely blind. Each animal was thinner than a ball point pen and, when curled up, was smaller than a 20 cent coin. Each weighed less than 2.5 grams.

They had not had food for several days and were in a bad way. Four soon died, but Rita persevered with the remaining two, feeding them five times a day with a mixture of honey and Dietelact from the smallest eye dropper she could find.

The animals soon put on weight. Their ears developed and their eyes opened. Each day the agile creatures would play in branches and blossoms in their cage. When Rita



*These pygmy possums were smaller than a 20 cent coin when they were abandoned by their parents.*

*Photos - Ray Smith*

approached, they scurried up to her, propping their head and fore paws on her thumb to be fed with an eye dropper. After six weeks they had reached adult size and were ready to be rehabilitated into the wild.

Ray set up his photographic equipment on the branches of bushy yate, showy banksia and scarlet banksia.

"The possums jumped from branch to branch, feeding and chasing each other with boundless energy," said



Ray. "I observed and photographed their antics for two and a half hours. One would suddenly stop moving, eye the camera mischievously and then spring out of sight of the view-finder. When I looked

up to see where it had gone I would find it sitting smugly on top of the camera lens."

It was soon time for the release. More nesting boxes were set up around the Averys' house and after several days they were released, quickly disappearing into the bushes. To the Averys' delight, they were found several weeks later curled up in the original nesting box in which they were first found.

Since then, pygmy possums have been seen in the vicinity on several occasions.



# LANDSCOPE

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Each year more people seek wilderness experiences, but many are unprepared for the difficulties they might encounter. Learn about the basics of outback safety and bushcraft on page 35.



Botanists search for a eucalypt last seen by Giles in his expedition across WA deserts 115 years ago. See page 28.



Will the honey possum become a secondary victim of dieback disease? See page 22.



Australia is a land of lizards - tough competitors evolving amid spinifex and wildfires in the Great Victoria Desert. Turn to page 10.



Straight and vigorous pines don't grow by accident. Years of research and breeding have gone into producing the perfect pine. See page 49.

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## COVER

The tiny honey possum (*Tarsipes rostratus*), seen in our cover illustration by Philippa Nikulinsky, feeds almost exclusively on nectar and pollen. However, most of its important food plants are threatened by dieback disease caused by the *Phytophthora* fungi. The endangered scarlet banksia (*Banksia coccinea*) is one plant species used by the possums that is highly susceptible to the dieback disease. See story on page 22.



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