

urban antics

by John Hunter

Just hanging on ...

Observing large attractive native mammals cavorting among the trees in our own backyards is probably something that most of us would like to do. It could be said that it is somewhat more stimulating than watching caged canaries or Tom the cat.

While some Perth suburbs do have brushtail possums, a common species that is found generally throughout the south-west, only Busselton and Albany and a few isolated spots between can boast about the nightly antics of the rare and endangered western ringtail possum (*Pseudocheirus occidentalis*).

The western ringtail has been in decline since the early 1900s following clearing for agriculture and urban development, and predation by foxes and feral cats. And if that's not enough, there are the natural pressures of dominance by larger more aggressive cousins, the brushtails, not to mention raptors and pythons looking for a quick meal.

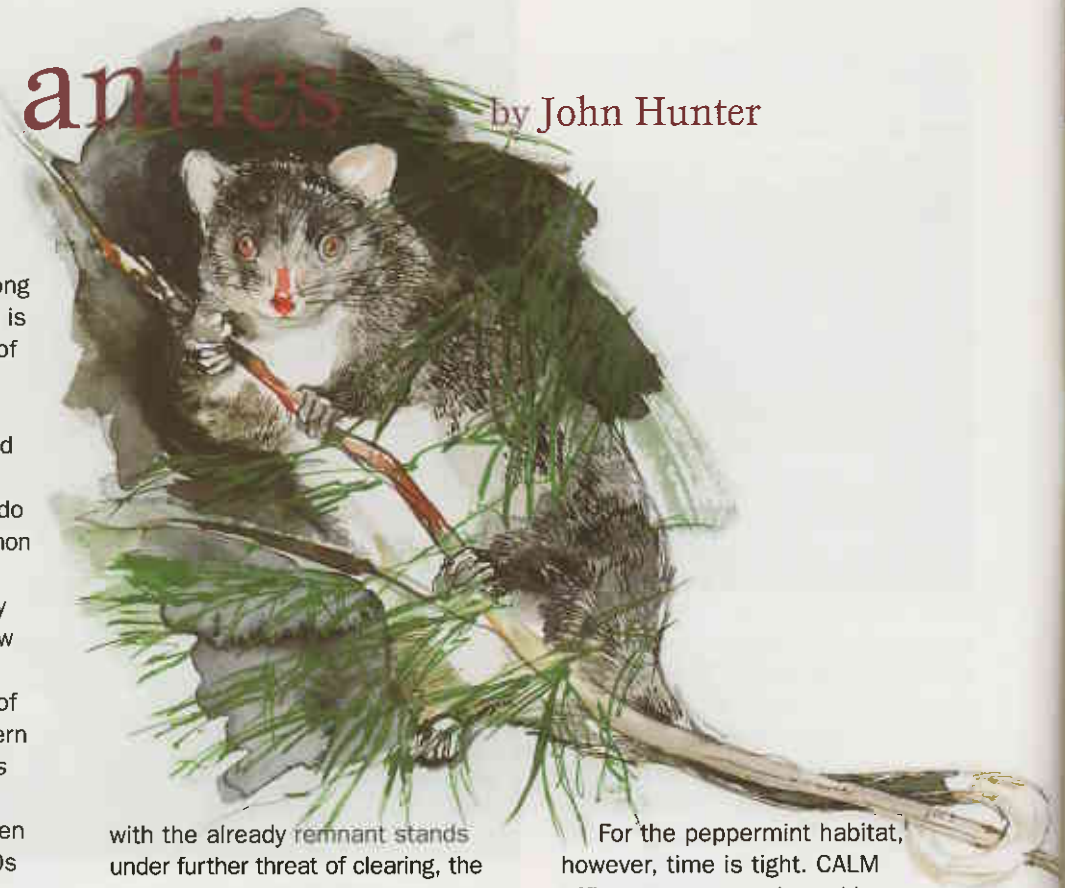
The animal is a specialist herbivore that prefers to feed, rest and socialise in the canopy of peppermint trees (*Agonis flexuosa*). Ringtails, in the quietness of night, browse then rest up to enable them to regurgitate their food and 'chew their cud'— they chew their food twice like a cow, but don't have a ruminant gut. They are, however, also fond of rose petals, insect larvae, fruit, the odd household scrap and the occasional eucalypt leaves.

Unfortunately, one of the only remaining dense and continuous peppermint forests near Perth is in the attractive and fashionable urban-like area between and around the townsites of Dunsborough and Busselton. This thin coastal strip of about 30 kilometres has become 'flavour of the decade' for residential and tourist complex developers and,

with the already remnant stands under further threat of clearing, the possums are under extra pressure.

Although the western ringtail adapts well to living in suburbia, the risk of death and injury from domestic pets and road accidents is always present. The animals regularly entrap themselves in household and other objects. Recently, they have been found alive in packing cases and in machinery delivered to other towns, and in old woodstoves with chimneys that, to them, resemble hollow logs. On the other hand, Busselton is lucky in that the local wildlife carers' group does a splendid job in rehabilitating the sick and injured animals to be used in translocation programs.

For the peppermint habitat, however, time is tight. CALM officers are currently working overtime with town councils, the building industry and landowners to determine a set of protocols for land clearing and to raise awareness of the need for people to design and build their dwellings to keep these threatened but clever noseyparkers out of harm's way. It also seems logical to me that a lot of property owners in the district need to be encouraged to reforest a lot of their farmlets and blocks with peppermint trees instead of exotic and non-local species that have very little benefit for local wildlife.



DID YOU KNOW?

- The genus name *Pseudocheirus* for the western ringtail possum is derived from the Greek words *pseudēs* meaning 'false' and *keirus* meaning 'hand'. When holding a branch the animal can oppose two fingers against the remaining three, similar to that of the thumb and four fingers of a human hand.
- The only known inland populations of western ringtails, where peppermint is still present but not the dominant species, are at Perup Forest, forest blocks north-east of Manjimup and karri-marri forest in Porongurup National Park.
- When referring to the western ringtail possum, Aboriginal people often used the words wamp and ngwayir.

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Erratum

The photograph in the Autumn 2004 issue of *LANDSCOPE* (mid left, page 52) is the rare *Diuris purdiei* not *Diuris corymbosa* as stated in the caption.

The photograph in the Summer 2003-04 issue of a snail on p. 56 and p. 61 was incorrectly captioned. The photo is of the introduced predatory snail *Oxychilus* sp., which is thought to be at least partly responsible for the extinction of the Pemberton and Albany snails, and is a threat to many of our native terrestrial snails.

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