

# Possum magic



'Mum! Dad! There's a  
possum in the stove!

These are the words that so many children squealed as they entered the kitchen of the jerrybuilt shack, which was the old research station accommodation at Perup Nature Reserve.

by Cliff Winfield





**E**xcited perhaps by the sound of children or the smell of fresh food arriving with the visitors, pink nostrils flanked by a pair of delicate pink-palmed paws would push up against the front grate of the firebox of the old Metter's wood stove. Brushtail possums can't resist a good hollow, and don't discern between an engineered and a natural one. So, when the wood stove was superseded by gas but left in situ, the possums entered down the chimney and colonised the firebox.

For the children, the experience was 'possum magic' and the delight in the eyes of the beholders was palpable. It didn't seem to matter that in some places brushtail possums are so common they are considered pests. In many cases, this was the visitors' first up-close encounter with native animals, and would form a memory that they could claw back years later.

### Setting the scene

If you draw a line between Bunbury and Albany, the Perup Nature Reserve (now a proposed national park) would bisect it. It lies on the eastern edge of the South-West jarrah forest, and beyond it the country has mostly been



cleared for agriculture. The area was once deemed inappropriate for agriculture because of the widespread presence of the naturally-occurring heartleaf poison, a native plant species containing the same compound as the manufactured 1080 poison. While native mammals were immune to the effects of heartleaf, it killed stock that grazed on it.

In the 1960s, the late Harry Winfield, a forester based at the Tone River Mill settlement, mentioned to Forests Department scientists that he'd seen tamar wallabies and woylies in the Perup River area. At the time, these mammals were on the threatened species list and believed to be extinct in the South-West. A spotlighting expedition led by late forestry researcher Barney White confirmed the presence

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**Main** Brushtail possums.

*Photo – Ann Storrie*

**Above** Farmland meets native bushland at Perup.

*Photo – Iain Copp*

**Below far left and left** A brushtail possum inside the old Perup research station.

*Photos – Ann Storrie*

of woylies. A fauna management unit was set up, and researchers looked at the impact of introduced predators on native wildlife at Perup and the effect of fire management regimes on tamar wallaby habitats.

Much of the research took place at night and early in the morning, so an abandoned part-cleared, 100-hectare farm surrounded by forest provided the ideal location for an overnight base. Using second hand and second grade materials, the Perup research station was built.

### Multi-purpose building

Years after it was first used as a research station, its purpose diversified to also house what was arguably one of Australia's first guided natural science tourism operations. Groups of schoolchildren were invited to take part in monitoring the ecology of the forest, including spotlighting and population surveys of several 'rare and endangered' forest mammals. The University of Western Australia (UWA) extension and professional development courses for schoolteachers provided similar experiences for adults.

In the 1990s, many people who had experienced the magic of Perup as students, teachers, part of the UWA extension courses, or through other Department of Conservation and Land Management (CALM) projects or interpretation activities responded to a





**Left** Tammar wallaby.  
*Photo – Dave Watts/Lochman  
Transparencies*

**Centre left** Brush-tailed phascogales.  
*Photo – Jiri Lochman*

**Below** Perup Nature Reserve.  
*Photo – Iain Copp*



call to form the Friends of Perup group, along with a number of farmers whose properties adjoined the reserve. The group assumed the role of providing interpretive experiences to groups of 10 to 20 people, who shared a common quest: to understand the uniqueness of Perup. They shared experiences with invited experts from CALM and other agencies on topics like numbats, fungi, wildlife photography, fire ecology, astronomy, frogs and orchids, delivered in an air of gastronomy and conviviality.

#### **Time for a facelift**

The old research station buildings were never really built for posterity, and by the mid-1990s it was clear they couldn't be offered seriously to paying guests. Fortunately, the Perup experience qualified for funding under the Commonwealth Government's Forest Ecotourism program. An ambitious five-stage redevelopment plan was drafted, and a mix of Commonwealth and State ecotourism grant applications—sponsored by the Friends of Perup—funded the





first stages: new group accommodation and a new kitchen/dining area.

Other interpretive activities have since been developed. Walktrails around three different wetlands, along a jarrah ridge and a night spotlighting route were marked; a hide was constructed in a nearby thicket to view tamar wallabies; and a reference library and two stereomicroscopes were purchased with reinvested funds from activity weekends run by the Friends of Perup.

The surrounding forest also provided an attractive feature in itself. As the area is largely free of dieback, vehicle access here has long been restricted to protect the forest from infection. This created an ideal resource for day walks along marked management tracks, many within 10 minutes drive of the accommodation, through a range of different ecotypes such as wandoo woodlands, granite outcrops, swamps and along the banks of the Tone River.

In 2001, as part of the State Government's Protecting Our Old Growth Forests Policy, Perup Nature Reserve, the adjoining Kingston forest and a string of smaller wetland reserves were proposed to become a national park. Perup qualified for State government 'New Parks' funding and a proposal to implement the other stages of the redevelopment plan was accepted. It also qualified for an Office of Sustainable Energy grant to upgrade the solar/wind energy generation system. The facility was closed for 18 months while the work was carried out.

### Back in business

Perup recently reopened, with a clear focus on community education on a broad range of conservation issues. A new classroom/laboratory, self-contained family accommodation, visiting scientist accommodation, enough bunks for a school class and a cottage



for a resident host have been added. The rammed earth buildings are mostly passive solar design, to maximise seasonal natural heating and cooling. Electricity is produced from the sun and wind; water is collected from the roofs; and toilet and wastewater is treated through a zero nutrient leach drain or hybrid composting toilets. There is no television, and mobile phones are out of range.

Nature study clubs, bushwalkers, writer groups, astronomy clubs, university students, groups of people with disabilities, visiting scientists, local families, international tourists and others have all discovered the magic of Perup. The price structure for accommodation makes it accessible to self-guided, not-for-profit groups, but first timers will benefit from paying for a guided experience.

The conservation value of the Perup forests, as a representative of lower rainfall jarrah forest and as a refuge for forest mammals, has long been realised. In the 1970s, it became a State Forest Management Priority Area for fauna and later a proposed nature reserve. Thirty-odd years on, the wildlife monitoring continues—mostly undertaken by volunteers—making it one of the longest running forest mammal monitoring sites in the world.

**Top left** Scented sun orchid (*Thelymitra macrophylla*).

Photo – Tom Chvojka

**Top right and above** Perup offers many walks in natural settings.

Photos – Iain Copp

The recovery of the mammal populations has been stunning. And, even though the old shack was demolished, the Metter's stove was saved and has been placed in the new guest lounge, complete with an artificial chimney waiting for new marsupial residents.



Cliff Winfield, the Parks and Visitor Services Regional Leader of CALM's Warren Region, was highly involved in the redevelopment of the Perup centre. He can be contacted on (08) 9771 7944 or by email ([cliffw@calm.wa.gov.au](mailto:cliffw@calm.wa.gov.au)).

To book your possum magic experience call the CALM Manjimup Office on (08) 9771 7988 and for more information about the Friends of Perup weekend activities call or email the author.

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