



NEARER TO

Nature

A chilly morning spent *Nearer to Nature* provided a group of youngsters an opportunity to learn about Western Australia's possums, see them up-close and enjoy a trip to the Perth hills. And, for at least one discerning five-year-old, it was the highlight of the school holidays.

photos and words by Rhianna King

For those of us with school-aged children (or grandchildren), school holidays are a hotly anticipated time where we seek to balance fun and adventure with downtime to rest up before the school term starts again. For my kids, this usually involves spending as much time outside as possible, whether we're at home in the backyard or in a park, to capitalise on the benefits brought by kids exploring their natural surroundings, developing and refining gross and fine motor skills, fostering

independence and problem-solving. However, the July school holidays can be a bit trickier than other times of the year when the weather can play havoc with even the best-laid plans, and the kids can get a tad toey being stuck inside, regardless of how much Play-Doh, Lego and kinetic sand there is on offer. So when *LANDSCOPE* graphic designer Tiffany Taylor suggested we take our young ones to a Parks and Wildlife *Nearer to Nature* activity I jumped at the chance.



● Perth Hills Discovery Centre

A COMMUNITY FAVOURITE

Nearer to Nature is Parks and Wildlife's community outreach program which delivers unique nature-based activities to schools and members of the community at a number of locations throughout Perth and across the south-west in a range of ecosystems. School programs such as excursions, incursions, professional learning as well as the ever-popular *Bush Rangers* program meet requirements of the Australian Curriculum. Activities run during the school holidays offer less formal but still fun hands-on experiences that are designed to bring kids up-close and personal with WA's plants and animals and provide opportunities to learn about Aboriginal culture. On this occasion we journeyed up to the Perth Hills Discovery Centre in Beelu National Park near Mundaring on a particularly chilly Monday morning to take part in the 'Possums tails tale' activity.



THE TALE OF TWO TAILS

The premise of this activity, designed for four to seven-year-olds, is to help kids understand the similarities and differences between brushtail and western ringtail possums (*Trichosurus vulpecula* and *Pseudocheirus occidentalis*). Conservation messages were woven through a number of well-timed activities, including the animals' conservation status, the threats they face, and why it's important to

protect these precious animals into the future.

Nearer to Nature guide Bec Warner led the session with the support of three volunteers who were on site to help the kids during the activities – especially handy during the 'pin the tail on the possum' game where blindfolded kids were looking for any surface to pin their tails to!

The kids enjoyed a lovely hand-written and drawn story by *Nearer to Nature* that told the tale of two possums. This provided context for a bushwalk where the young explorers were tasked with the role of spotting 'possums' in

Possum tales

Western ringtail possums can be distinguished from larger brushtail possums by their smaller rounded ears, and tails with shorter fur. Their tail fur lies flat and ends in a white tip and is used for climbing. While, as their name suggests, brushtail possums' tails are bushy, and they have more pointed faces than ringtails. Adult brushtail possums are also generally bigger than ringtail possums (1.3 kilograms compared to one kilogram).

Brushtail possums have retained a wider distribution (throughout the south-west) than ringtail possums which are now limited to coastal areas with peppermint trees and isolated pockets of jarrah forest near Manjimup. The decline of both species has been attributed to clearing and fox predation.



Western ringtail possum



Brushtail possum

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Main *Nearer to Nature* participants took a walk through Beelu National Park looking for possums.

Inset top 'Pin the tail on the possum' was a hit among the kids.

Inset centre *Nearer to Nature* guide Bec Warner led the activities.

Inset below Sue Turner from Blue Gum Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation with 'Matilda'.

Above A hand-drawn and written story book captivated young participants.

Left Brushtail and ringtail possums.
Photos – Jiri Lochman



Volunteering

If you have a little spare time and enjoy the outdoors, there is a wide range of opportunities in assisting *Nearer to Nature* to run programs at venues all around the Perth metropolitan area. Phone our programs officer on (08) 9295 2244 for more information.



the trees. They were given clues to help them find the nocturnal animals – such as that ringtail possums live in nests called ‘dreys’, while brushtail possums inhabit hollows. They then worked as a group to identify the differences between the two species, including the shape and size of their ears and nose, colour of their fur and overall size, to complete a giant puzzle. This segued into an activity where the kids coloured in a picture on a puzzle that they were able to take home.

Then, the real stars of the show emerged and the kids met ‘Matilda’ the brushtail possum and ‘Pepe’ the western ringtail possum, which were both under the care of wildlife rehabilitator Sue Turner from Blue Gum Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation. The captivated audience of youngsters (no mean feat) listened attentively as Sue told them the stories of how the animals made it into her care (one involved a dog and the other a vehicle) – tales all too common among rescued native animals. She discussed the decline in numbers of both species and the reduction of available habitat caused by development and urbanisation of our bush as well as predation by foxes and feral cats. Then she shared information about Parks and Wildlife’s *Western Shield* program which aims to return the balance and mix of native animals in selected areas

Top left The kids worked in a group to complete a giant puzzle.

Above left Volunteering is a rewarding way to give something back and spend time in nature.

Above A take-home colour-in puzzle extended the fun of the activity well after it had ended.

of WA’s environment to levels comparable to pre-European settlement through feral cat and fox baiting, and other initiatives.

A GREAT MORNING OUT

Judging by the amount my kids chattered away in the car as we journeyed back ‘down the hill’ about all the things they’d learnt, the objective of the activity was well and truly met. The kids enjoyed doing something a bit different, and I loved seeing them having some wholesome fun in a natural setting. The lack of queues and crowds was an added bonus. And, at \$14 per child, it was great value for money.

In fact, we all enjoyed it so much that I’m already planning another activity for next holidays. We might even spend a night in the adjoining campground so we can explore more of the area. In the meantime, we’ll keep an eye out for possums in our local area, now we’re experts on what we’re looking for.

Do it yourself

Nearer to Nature runs programs at a number of sites in Perth as well as in the south-west. For more information and a copy of the activity program, phone (08) 9295 2244 or visit www.dpaw.wa.gov.au/get-involved/nearer-to-nature/community.

Contact us: *Nearer to Nature*, Perth Hills Discovery Centre, 380 Allen Road Mundaring, WA 6073.

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To book activities in the south-west, phone: (08) 9725 4300



Scan here to get an overview of the *Nearer to Nature* program

Scan this QR code or visit Parks and Wildlife’s ‘LANDSCOPE’ playlist on YouTube.



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