

Super highway: *safe passage for possums*

A newly installed rope bridge over Beeliam Drive in the City of Cockburn provides a safe passage for local possums between Yangebup Lake and Kogolup Lake within Beeliam Regional Park.

by **Rhianna King**





Well before the advent of motorcars and their associated infrastructure, brushtail possums (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) were known as ‘koomal’ by the local Aboriginal people who used the area now known as Beeliam Regional Park for camping, to source food and other materials, and as a trade route. Brushtail possums are believed to have been common in the region but, like so many other native animals, they have been impacted by urban development, increased habitat fragmentation and introduced predators such as feral cats and foxes.

FACTS AND FIGURES

In October 2018, the City of Cockburn conducted monitoring in the 142-hectare reserve to the north of Beeliam Drive, which takes in Yangebup Lake, and the 187-hectare area to the road’s south that surrounds Kogolup Lake. The survey, which was carried out over three weeks, detected 15 brushtail possums in the southern area but none in the northern section.

In order to encourage free movement of the possums between the two fragments of suitable habitat and reduce the risk of them being killed or injured by cars as they cross the busy suburban thoroughfare, the City of Cockburn has installed a 34-metre rope ladder across the four-lane Beeliam Drive.



Left Brushtail possums were once common in the area.

Photo – David Bettini

Below left Beeliam Regional Park comprises 19 lakes and other associated wetlands.

Photo – Ann Storrie

Above The possum highway stretches across Beeliam Drive.

Photo – DBCA

INSTALLING THE BRIDGE

While novel, possum bridges are not new; they have been used successfully in the State’s south-west at Dawesville, and on Caves Road between Busselton and Dunsborough, as well as in other parts of Australia.

The 20-centimetre-wide cable-tensioned rope bridge selected for Beeliam was constructed by Nationwide Netbuilders, which has supplied fauna bridges and animal crossings for use throughout Australia. The company



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has worked with government bodies, construction groups and universities to develop the ladder-style design, which ensures the safety of the animals and the passing traffic underneath.

The ladder is suspended between two 8.7-metre-tall wooden poles, which were installed by Cockburn-based Future Power – a family-owned company that typically works with powerlines but was only too happy to assist with this project. Because the closure of Beelihar Drive was necessary to install the bridge, the project was completed between 10pm Saturday night and 5am Sunday morning and in consultation with Main Roads.

The site for the bridge – about 200 metres east of Dunraven Drive – was selected so that ropes could also be anchored to suitable habitat trees. This provides the possums with access to the structure without them having to descend to the ground below.

REASONS AND RATIONALE

Providing the possums with safe passage between the two areas will give them the best chance for long-term survival in the area. Not only will the bridge reduce the number of possums that

are killed and injured by cars as they try to cross the road, it will also offer protection from the introduced predators, such as foxes and feral cats, that prey on them.

In addition, enabling movement between the two bushland areas will improve the breeding prospects and increase the population’s genetic diversity, which can be hampered when species are confined to small, isolated pockets.

BUILD IT AND THEY WILL COME

It is expected to take some time for the possums to figure out how to use the bridge, but the City of Cockburn is confident that, as has occurred at other sites, once they begin to use it, the possums will travel freely between the two reserves.

There are plans to erect a motion-sensing camera to monitor the possums’ movement across the bridge. And possums that were trapped during the survey were fitted with microchips that will be scanned by microchip readers on the bridge when they are installed in the future.

In the meantime, road users are encouraged to get in contact with the City of Cockburn to report any sightings of possums on the bridge.



Top left The bridge was constructed at night to minimise disruption to traffic.

Photo – City of Cockburn

Top Brushtail possums.

Photo – Jiri Lochman

Above The highway is suspended between two 8.7-metre-tall poles.

Photo – City of Cockburn

Below Possums trapped during the survey were fitted with microchips so they can be monitored in the future.

Photo – Jiri Lochman



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