



# The irresistible honey possum



With only a few hours before the sun rose over Western Australia's southern coast, Parks and Wildlife Service staff and volunteers worked quickly to check and clear fauna traps in the hopes of recording a tiny, beloved honey possum.

**by Stephen Butler and  
Emma Massenbauer**





**I**t is early morning in Cape Arid National Park, the sun is just breaking the horizon, it is chilly and the dew is thick on the ground as a small team of Parks and Wildlife Service staff and volunteers walk out to the *Western Shield* grid on Poison Creek Road. The grid contains a combination of Sheffield, Elliott and pit traps that need to be checked and cleared within three hours of sunrise.

For the volunteers, this is a great opportunity to see some of the small native fauna found on the south coast of Western Australia. But even more enticing is the opportunity to observe and hopefully photograph the world's only

truly nectivorous marsupial, the honey possum (*Tarsipes rostratus*), or noolbenger.

The honey possum is endemic to the south-west of WA, found from Kalbarri to the east of Esperance, favouring the floristically rich heath vegetation of coastal WA. It's a totem animal for some of the Noongar traditional owners of the region.

## TWO OF A KIND

The group approaches the first of 15 pit traps with a keen anticipation of what they might find. Kneeling above the pit trap and reaching down carefully, the makeshift shelter that is placed at the base of the trap to provide cover for animals

*Opposite page*

**Main** Honey possum.

*Photo – Janine Guenther*

**Inset** A western mouse (*Pseudomys occidentalis*) recorded during fauna trapping in Cape Arid.

**Above** *Western Shield* Cape Arid fauna trapping. *Photos – Shem Bisluk/DBCA*



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possums



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### Tiny features

The honey possum is a distinct animal, tiny in size, (up to 10 grams), with an elongated muzzle. The species is famous for its long snout – the species name, *rostratus*, is Latin meaning ‘beaked’.

It has three brown stripes running along the length of its back. The central stripe is dark brown starting between the ears and ends at the base of the tail. The outer two stripes are generally lighter in colour.



that may have spent the night, is carefully lifted. There, under the shelter are two honey possums, one is fast asleep, and the other full of energy.

The team speculates that the active possum was a more recent capture, explaining its behaviour of running fast laps around the pit trap. Quickly, and with practiced efficiency, this animal is caught by hand and placed into a small bag. The other possum is in a state of torpor, a common strategy by honey possums to conserve energy by lowering their metabolic rate and internal temperature, and it too, is gently placed in a small bag for processing.

Both animals are weighed, sexed, the head length measured, and the tail marked with a permanent marker for identification in the event of recapture. The females are checked for pouch young or joeys. A female may produce between two and three joeys at any time of the year when food is plentiful. Finally, before being released, both are given a drink of honey

water, referred to as ‘possum petrol’, to ‘fuel them up’ and replace the energy they may have lost during the night.

### SWEET TOOTH

The possums are released on a *Banksia speciosa* flower, at which point they forget all about their recent capture and bury their heads for a feed of nectar.

The photographic opportunities are superb with a combination of the early morning light, the brightly coloured banksia flower and two compliant marsupials focused on drinking their fill. Their tongue tips are bristled to allow the honey possums to collect nectar from the flowers. At 1.8 centimetres, their tongue is almost a quarter of their head and body length and allows them to reach deep into a variety of flowers to obtain the nectar or pollen. To survive, honey possums require a continuous year-round supply of nectar.

Once they have had their fill, both animals move away swiftly and nimbly,

demonstrating their arboreal (tree-dwelling) skills. The photographers are visibly disappointed to see them go but brimming with anticipation at the 14 traps still to clear and the possibility of more honey possums to photograph.

**Above left** Honey possum drinking water.  
*Photo – Shem Bisluk/DBCA*

**Above** Honey possum collecting nectar.  
*Photo – David Bettini*

**Left** Cape Arid National Park.  
*Photo – Ann Storr*

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