

I can't claim to be an expert on Ring-tailed possums but after fairly constant observation of their behaviour on our property just near Albany for four years, I have learnt a few things which may be of interest to others.

For starters, our property consists of 11 ha of mixed paddocks, wetland, remnant vegetation and more formal gardens, just 3 kms north of Albany town centre. Most of my observations of the possums, however, were restricted to an area immediately around our house, which includes about 1 ha of mixed Marri, Jarrah and Sheoak remnant vegetation and half a hectare of mixed Australian bushes and trees.

Between April 1999 and a severe winter gale in 2000, sightings within the 1.5 ha varied from 2-6 individuals a night, in groupings of up to three but mainly as individuals or as a mother and young. The maximum number of possums I counted on the same night was 10 - not bad for such a small area. Activity normally started an hour after sunset, with the possums well spaced. Surprisingly, each night about 7pm, two small possums would go to sleep in the fork of a large wattle tree, before restarting activity an hour or so later. Why they needed a catnap so soon after getting up I have no idea!

The possums would come from the remnant vegetation and eat the flowers and leaves of the exotic plantings. Special favourites were oak leaves (especially when young), New Zealand Christmas Tree leaves, Bald Island Marlock flowers and various planted wattle and eucalypt leaves and flowers. Only occasionally did I see possums eating native vegetation, although Jarrah new growth was favoured. I definitely got the feeling sheoak leaves were their least favourite food, and I never saw them eating anything on a Marri tree - despite them being the commonest native vegetation in the area.

In the severe gale of 2000 our property lost 8 large planted trees, including the young possums'

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UNDERSTANDING RING-TAILED POSSUMS

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favourite resting place and food supply. Food was obviously diminished as since that date I have never seen more than three possums in the area - and often fail to see any.

In these four years I have only once seen a possum travelling on the ground. Favourite food trees with no connecting vegetation never have possums in them, with the possums unwilling to cross open ground of even a few meters. Favourite food trees before the gale have been ignored since, if the connection of even a single twig has been lost.

Another implication of the gale and loss of trees has been the concentrated feeding on one or two exotic trees that still have connected pathways to the remnant vegetation. The oak tree has suffered a hammering, with leaves stripped bare and it is now half dead, although whether from loss of leaves from the possums, or from recent dry summers, I am not certain.

Nocturnal lodgings range from forks of trees without any nests, to nests using twigs or circles of sheoak leaves, very loosely gathered on the side of trees from 1-5 m off the ground. Elsewhere on the property,

Sydney Golden Wattle (*Acacia longifolia*) is a favourite nesting tree, with very large nests made of the trees' leaves. Similar nests exist in the wetland vegetation, with teatree being a favourite building material.

Attempts at constructing artificial nesting sites have met with mixed success. Two heavy Jarrah logs that were cut in half and hollowed out by chainsaw, before being lashed together and hoisted in trees, are now occupied by bees. A third attempt simply used an already hollow smaller log, blocking an end. This is now occupied by a possum. It is noticeable that other hollows previously occupied by parrots and maybe by possums are also now occupied by bees. Whether this is related to the decline in possums I do not know.

Management implications

My experience with local possums has taught me the importance of wildlife corridors. Not corridors kilometers wide, or hundreds of meters, but in this case a single tree, branch or even twig. The loss of such connections has fundamentally disrupted the behaviour of possums on our property, depriving them of habitat, nesting places and food supplies. A dramatic drop in the population of possums has ensued with the loss of these connections and has concentrated feeding on a few trees, to their detriment.

If we are going to maintain a healthy population of possums, we need to cater for ease of movement to allow food sources to be utilised. This means careful thought when making firebreaks and access paths. It will take many years before the replanting I have done will replace the trees lost in the gale, but hopefully once these grow and the connections are restored, I will see possum numbers grow again.

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[Incidentally, by association with the name used for the leaf nest created by squirrels, a possum's 'nest' is often called a 'drey'. Ed.]