

- ▶ HOME
- ▶ ABOUT US
- ▶ PROJECTS
- ▶ LATEST NEWS
- ▶ BOOKSHOP
- ▶ FOREST FACTS
- ▶ NATIONAL PARKS
- ▶ TOURISM & RECREATION
- ▶ LANDSCOPE
- ▶ FOR SCHOOLS
- ▶ SCIENCE MATTERS
- ▶ PLANTS & ANIMALS
- ▶ SEARCH
- ▶ MAILBOX

Home: Plants & Animals: Getting to know: Brushtail Possum

Plants & Animals

Brushtail Possum

*Trichosurus vulpecula*

Brushtail possums are among the most adaptable of the native mammals, living in a variety of habitats including house roofs, chimneys and the like. Abundant over much of Australia, they can survive some disturbance and often flourish when other species struggle. Brushtails were hunted extensively for their pelts in days gone by.

DESCRIPTION: Brushtails found in WA are usually silver-grey with a pale belly. Some individuals, however, can be quite dark and occasionally have reddish shoulders and necks. The tail is bushy although the underside is partly bare. The tip can be either black or white. Brushtail possums have large eyes and erect, prominent ears. Their faces are more pointed than ringtails. They are also bigger, with females attaining around 1.3 kilograms and males 1.6 kilograms. Males often have a reddish stain on their chest, indicating an active scent gland.

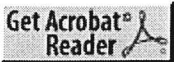
STATUS AND DISTRIBUTION: Brushtails live in a wide range of habitats. Throughout their present range they are common and frequently found in towns and cities. However, their former range has been considerably reduced by clearing and they have also disappeared from large areas of more arid country.

PREFERRED HABITAT: They favour open forest and woodland with sufficient older trees to provide hollows.

LIFE HISTORY: Moving at night, brushtails will spend some time on the ground moving from tree to tree in search of the fresh growth on young trees. Leaves form the

main part of the diet, supplemented with fruits and blossoms. They can climb rapidly and will make daring leaps between branches of adjacent trees. Hollows are used for daytime refuge, so possums tend to use the larger old and dead trees which offer more chance of such sites. Brushtails generally breed in autumn. The young stays in the pouch for four to five months and remains with its mother for another six to eight weeks, either in the nest or on mum's back. Brushtails only have one young, but most survive until weaned. They are quite territorial, with the males scent-marking and actively defending their home range against other males. They are quite vocal and may hiss, cough and scream.

HOW TO SEE THEM: Some people living near bushland, or in some suburbs with numerous trees, need look no further than their gardens. Spotlighting in forest areas is usually successful. With a little practice, daytime visitors to the forest should be able to find trees frequently used by possums, usually large marri trees with tell-tale scratching on their bark or large possum tracks. CALM runs a Go Bush program in the Hills Forest that offers guided spotlighting activities. A visit to the Perup Forest Ecology Centre or to Dryandra Woodland near Narrogin would also prove rewarding



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