



Brushtail

Ringtail possum

Pseudocheirus peregrinus

Common Ringtail possums are much smaller than the Brushtail possum with whom they often share the urban habitat. They are a nocturnal marsupial with a forward-facing pouch. Their head to body length of 30 to 35cm is matched by their tail length and weigh between 700g to 1.1kg.

The fur colouring is variable with grey to brown on the head and back, grading into rust - brown on the sides and legs. Pale grey to white on the underside with red orange legs. Their ears are short and rounded with a white fur beneath. The tail is tapering and prehensile (grasping) with a white tip. It is furry above and hairless underneath to enhance grip. The tail is carried in a coil when not in use. They also have two opposable fingers on each hand that assists with climbing and eating.

Habitat

Both Ringtail and Brushtail possums are found along the eastern seaboard of Australia, including south east South Australia and all of Tasmania.

Possums are almost exclusively tree-dwelling, in forests, woodlands, rainforests, dense scrub and suburban gardens. Brushtail possums are a solitary species, preferring to live alone, however in the inner city they are often found living in groups. Male and female Ringtail possums live together as pairs and sometimes in groups of eight.

Ringtail possums build spherical nests (dreys) made of leaves and twigs in the branches of trees. Brushtail possums live in tree hollows. Both species have adapted to living in urban environments, often foraging in gardens and sleeping in the ceilings of buildings, cavity walls and sheds.

Brushtail possum

Trichosurus vulpecula

Brushtail possums are about as big as a domestic cat. Their body can grow to be 55cm long and the tail a further 25cm and can weigh between 1.3 kg to 4.5 kg. They have a pointed face, with a pink nose, long oval shaped black ears and long whiskers. Adult males are generally larger than females.

They have a silver-grey and sometimes slightly copper coloured coat, with a pale to white coloured underside. Their tail is dark brown with hair longer than the rest of the body giving it a bushy appearance. The tail is also prehensile, making it easy for it to grasp branches, leap significant distances and assist their sharp claws when climbing trees. Adult males may have reddish fur on their chest which has been stained by their scent gland.

Food

Possums are mainly leaf-eaters but they also eat flowers and fruits from a variety of native and exotic trees and shrubs. A possums diet is often supplemented by eating grass, fungi and bird's eggs. Occasionally they eat small vertebrates such as baby birds.

Brushtail possums prefer eucalyptus leaves with a high nutrient content. They can distinguish between high and low nutrient quality leaves, even when the foliage of these plants is intermingled. Brushtails will forage on the ground for food, while Ringtails prefer to remain in the trees.



Ringtail



Brushtail



Brushtail with baby

Breeding

Sexual maturity for possums is reached at one year of age. In Melbourne the consorting period occurs during late April, when the male follows, grooms, forages and later nests with the female. Mating occurs in May with a gestation period of 17 days. The young remain in the pouch for four months. Females have four teats and usually produce one to two young, who are weaned at six months of age. They may go on to mate again in late October to produce another litter in mid to late November.

New young spend up to five months in the pouch before attaching to the mothers back for a further two months. Ringtail possums will generally live for three or more years. Brushtail possums can live up to 11 years.

Communication

Possoms communicate by sound and scent. Deep coughs, sharp hisses and screeches and guttural growls are used to ward off intruding possums near their nest or home range. They also make sounds during the breeding season or when a predator threatens them. Male possums mark their territory by coating tree branches with a scent released from the glands on their chest.

Possum guards

Increasing populations of possums have impacted on Melbourne's parks and gardens to the extent that many trees are now banded with possum guards (collars of sheet metal or perspex). The guards prevent possums feeding and nestling activities damaging the foliage of vulnerable trees. Often if one tree is at risk, the surrounding trees will also be banded to prevent the possums from jumping from one tree canopy to the next.

Threats to possums

Possoms existence can be threatened by a loss of habitat, especially tree-hollows, through land clearing for agriculture and urbanisation. Predators such as cats, dogs, foxes and owls also threaten their existence.

Human feeding of possums can cause poor nutrition, spread disease and alter the natural behaviour of wildlife. Feeding of possums contribute to the overpopulation and the presence of vermin at feeding sites which also effects the water quality and environmental amenity of the area.

Protection of possums

Possoms are an Australian native animal and are protected under the Wildlife Act 1975. It is an offence to take, destroy injure or disturb any Australian wildlife including possums.

In Melbourne's park and gardens possums co-exist with people. Currently there are up to 12 possums per hectare. In their natural environment there would only be one possum per 12 hectares.

If you see an injured possum or other wildlife remember they are wild, so do not approach.

For wildlife rescue contact the City of Melbourne on **9658 9658**.

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