

Brushtail & Ringtail Possums

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There are 23 species of possums found in Australia, two of which can be found on Phillip Island. Possums are native Australian marsupials. A marsupial is an animal which gives birth to immature young and the young continue their development inside their mother's pouch.

Common brushtail possum *Trichosurus vulpecula*

The common brushtail possum is the most widely distributed possum across Australia, being found in all states and territories. They are silvery grey in colour with cream underparts and a white to brownish-yellow belly. They also have a bushy, black tail, black around the eyes and a black band across the snout.

Habitat

Common brushtail possums are an arboreal animal, meaning they live in trees and are well adapted for climbing. Although naturally found in most forest and woodland habitats, common brushtail possums have adapted well to living in urban areas. They can commonly be found in roofs of houses in areas of urban sprawl where natural habitat has been removed. As they are nocturnal, brushtail possums make their home in hollows of trees where they will spend daylight hours, spending the night foraging for food to eat.

Diet

Common brushtail possums are dominantly herbivores, eating mainly plant material such as eucalypt leaves, blossoms and fruits of both native and introduced plant species. Occasionally they may feed on insects or scavenge for meat. In suburban areas, common brushtail possums are known to scavenge for any types of food.



Statistics

Weight: 1.5-4kg

Length: ~35-55cm body—25-40cm tail

Average life: 10-11 years

Adaptations

Like the koala, possums have two thumbs on their front feet to help them climb. They have a hand-like back foot which also enables them to grasp on to branches with all four limbs for climbing, as well as sharp claws and a strong, flexible (prehensile) tail for curling around branches. Common brushtail possums lead a largely solitary life, however they communicate to others through sound and scent. Their voice is a characteristic loud series of rattling nasal coughs and hisses.

Breeding

Common brushtail possums breed throughout the year, with most births occurring between March and November. The female gives birth to a single, furless young weighing only 2g after 17.5 days gestation. The young then makes its way to the mother's pouch where it attaches to one of her two teats. The joey stays in its mother's pouch for four to five months and then travels around by riding on her back.

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Ringtail Possum

Pseudocheirus peregrinus

The ringtail possum is a medium size possum that is found along the east coast of Australia and throughout Tasmania. The ringtail possums fur is a grizzled grey-brown above with a strong rufous tinge to the limbs and flanks. White fur is found on their underparts, with patches below and behind their ears and have a distinctive white tip to their long tail.

Habitat

Ringtail possums are common in open and closed forests, coastal shrubs and gardens. Being a nocturnal species, during daylight hours they shelter in large spherical dreys constructed of shredded bark, leaves and twigs in dense shrubbery, or a tree hollow lined with leaves. They are a social animal, occurring as family groups occupying the one drey.

Diet

Of a nighttime, the ringtail possum spends its time foraging for leaves, flowers and fruits of both native and introduced plants. During the day whilst in the drey, they will eat their own faecal pellets to extract the nutrients twice to ensure they get the most out of their food.

Adaptations

Like the brushtail possum, ringtail possums also have two thumbs, hand-like back feet and sharp claws to help them climb. Their long prehensile tail has a friction pad on the underside to help cling to branches as well as carry vegetation. When not in use, they curl the tail up into rings, which is how they get their name. They move through the trees by leaping and bounding and crawling through foliage. Ringtail possums are shy and not easily sighted, but are more commonly heard. Their call is a soft, high-pitched, insect-like chirping sound. At times they also make a harsher 'zip,zip' call.



Statistics

Weight: 0.6-1kg

Length: ~32-38cm body 30-38cm tail

Average life: 6-7 years

Breeding

Breeding for the ringtail possum usually occurs from April to November, with usually one or two litters a year. The newborn attaches to a nipple for approximately 50 days and then stays in the pouch for another four months. It then either stays in the nest or clings to its mother's back and is weaned by six months of age. Of all the 23 possum species, only with the ringtail possum is the care of the young often shared by the father.

Conservation of possums

The general decline of possums is thought to be due to logging and land-clearance, as these activities result in a loss of habitat. Dog and cat attacks, as well as being struck by cars, also results in many deaths of possums. You can help by keeping pets indoors after dark, driving slowly in wildlife areas, replanting habitat for them to dwell in, or placing a possum box in your yard. Pouch checks are also advised on any native animals that have been hit by a car. In the event of finding any sick, injured or orphaned wildlife, please phone Wildlife Victoria on 1300 094 535.