

# Common Brushtail Possum

*Trichosurus vulpecula*

## Description

The Common Brushtail Possum is a well known nocturnal marsupial, and the most common of the possum species. This gregarious, friendly and sometimes cheeky creature often visits campsites and homes looking for food scraps.

The possum is common throughout much of Australia. The Tasmanian possum is an endemic subspecies. They are larger and weigh around 4kg on average. Similar in size to a cat, they have a bushy black tail that is adapted for grasping, a pink nose, and they hold their food with their front paws. They have been known to live up to 12 years in the wild.

They have 4 main colour variations with black being more prevalent in higher rainfall areas, and grey to brown in northern, central and eastern regions. The third colour, gold, is quite rare and caused by a genetic mutation. Older possums may develop a reddish-tan colour on the belly which may extend to the sides and back.

## Footprint of a Brushtail Possum.



## Distribution

This species of possum is widespread throughout Tasmania, including forested, farming and urban areas.



Until the early part of last century the Brushtail Possum was confined to forests and mountain areas and it was the Ringtail Possum that was the more prevalent species. The population of ringtail possums declined rapidly after many years of excessive trapping and shooting for its fur. The gap that the Ringtail Possum left was filled by the Brushtail Possum and the Ringtail population has never recovered.

## Habitat Requirements

A key requirement for possums is access to adequate shelter. In the forests, possums prefer to sleep in tree hollows in large tall trees with a good canopy cover. During nights of inclement weather they may shelter close to the ground in hollow logs. Research has shown that an individual possum has between six and 12 den sites. In urban areas where tree hollows may not be available, they sometimes sleep in roof spaces in houses or sheds.

Although preferring forested areas, the possum has adapted well to living around human habitation and can be found in suburban areas and parks within cities. Sometimes they disturb residents with their loud stomping on roofs. The Tasmanian Department of Primary Industries, Parks, Water and Environment has excellent information on their website on living with possums. This includes how to possum-proof your roof, and garden, and how to build a nest box so that the possum can live happily near you, without disturbing you. Go to [www.dpipwe.tas.gov.au](http://www.dpipwe.tas.gov.au) and search for 'Living with Brushtail Possums'.

The Brushtail Possum is one of the few native species to have adapted to living closely with humans, as their natural habitat has been progressively cleared to make way for houses and towns. Many other species have not been as adaptable and have not survived the massive changes to their habitat.

## Diet

Possums mainly eat the leaves of eucalypts and other native species, herbs, flowers and fruits. They forage at all levels of the forest from the treetops to ground level and will usually eat three to four species in a night of foraging. They have found themselves in trouble with humans because of their adaptability, as they eat plants in suburban gardens, raid vegetable gardens and forestry plantations, including pine trees. In urban areas the Possum will raid compost piles and generally eat a variety of food, which may not be good for it, including bread.

## Carers Story

Possums feel distress: Gideon, an orphaned Brushtail Possum that was big enough to have been out of the pouch and riding on mum's back, was found beside his dead mother on the road. He was taken to a wildlife carer. He would scream in his sleep and wake up in the night crying for a couple of weeks until he slowly adjusted to life without a mum.

### Habits (Family/Social)

They are largely solitary creatures, with the only prolonged contact being between mother and baby. Encounters between possums during the night are usually mild. They tend to avoid contact, peering at each other with erect ears. They generally avoid each other by marking their scent on branches and other objects. Glands on their chest, under the chin and at the base of the tail are used to mark their territory.

Home ranges can vary enormously, depending of food availability from as low as one hectare to upwards of 20 hectares. Males tend to have a larger home range, but male and female home ranges overlap. The number of possums per hectare is generally between less than one possum and up to six possums per hectare, where the feeding is good.

Occasionally they do share dens where sleeping spots are hard to come by. Young males leave the territory they were born in and search for their own territory. There is a high mortality rate as these young possums are often on the ground and crossing roads. Females have been shown to often stay in their mother's territory, if there are sufficient den sites.

Studies of the behaviour of Brushtail Possums showed that about 16% of their time is spent feeding, 30% travelling 44% immobile and 10% grooming, spending an estimated seven hours outside of their den from dusk.

Their well known sounds - deep guttural growls, hisses and screeches - are mainly made during the mating season, or when threatened by a predator.

### Breeding

Brushtail Possums start breeding from one year of age, although the females are more successful in rearing young in their second year. Baby possums are born in the Autumn. There is usually only one joey, although the



Brushtail Possum

Photo: Megan Earl

forward facing pouch contains two teats. The infant possum suckles in the pouch for around 120 days, being permanently attached to the teat for the first 80 days. The infant then rides on its mother's back, coming and going from the pouch to suckle for the next six weeks. It is fully independent by the age of six months.

### Threats

Brushtail Possums are a partly protected species in Tasmania. They are often shot, poisoned or euthanased under permit as it is claimed they are pests, eating things they shouldn't or making noises in people's roofs. This is only a temporary solution to the problems possums may cause, however, as it does not take long for young possums, seeking vacant territory, to recolonise. The commonly held assumption that they are in plague proportions is not correct. Their population will naturally rise in response to the available resources in their environment. They will breed up to the level that their chosen habitat will support. It is necessary to limit their access to food sources by use of appropriate fencing and other deterrent methods in order to limit their population.

There is also a fledgling commercial possum industry, see Issues Sheet No. 6 for more information on this topic.

In the forests, logging destroys old trees that provide nesting hollows. Trees need to be 100 years old or older in order to produce appropriate hollows for Brushtail Possums, and a range of other birds and mammals that utilise tree hollows.