



Environment and Resource Management

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Brushtail possums

Trichosurus vulpecula

Whether thumping across corrugated iron roofs or sheltering in ceilings, brushtail possums are one of the most common native animals in Queensland's cities and towns.

Brushtail possums are native, nocturnal marsupials, which shelter in hollows during the day.

In cities and towns, brushtail possums take advantage of broken tiles, loose sheets of iron or unfinished work to shelter in ceilings or between floors of houses.

As they live around people's houses, brushtail possums are one of the rare native mammals that continue to share space with people in urban areas.

This animal acts as a house inspector - it only gains entry to homes that are in disrepair or have unfinished work.

Brushtails help control the spread of a parasitic native plant. They can also give you the chance to see native wildlife through night spotlighting.

You can take a few simple steps to make sure you don't come into conflict with the brushtail possum. And, in doing so, you can build and enjoy a link with a member of Australia's native wildlife.

What does it look like?

A black bushy tail, large pointy ears, and a silver-grey coat make the cat-sized possum easy to recognise.

Males weigh 1.3-4.5kg and females 1.2-3.5kg. Males also have reddish-brown fur on their shoulders.

With pointed face, oval ears and a bushy tail, brushtail possums are agile climbers and are able to survive in many habitats from open forest to rainforest.

The possum's tail can't support its weight and is only partly capable of grasping. But its tail, sharp claws, and opposable first toes on its hind feet are useful for climbing.

Possum colour and size vary widely depending on location.

Where does it live?

Brushtail possums prefer treed areas such as open forest and woodlands. They're rare in dry central Australia.



Brushtail possum: Photo DERM.

While plentiful in south-east Australia and Tasmania, the brushtail possum is declining in other parts of the country.

Found in most parts of Queensland, the brushtail possum becomes less common in the drier western parts of the state.

Common in cities, it can use just about any dark hollow for a home. In its natural habitat, the possum lives in fallen logs, tree trunks or dead branches.

A brushtail possum spends most of its time in the trees but travels a lot on the ground.

What does it eat?

Leaves, flowers, and fruits of native plants are the brushtail possum's favourite foods. They also eat fruits like bananas and pawpaws.

Leaves are the main part of their diet and some of their favourite types are very toxic. In fact, the brushtail possum has a very high tolerance to plant toxins.

Brushtail possums also help to control the spread of parasitic native mistletoe plants. If this plant thrives, it can kill a eucalypt tree.

Brushtail possums regularly feed on these plants and so help protect the same trees they rely on for food and shelter.

Because the brushtail lives in all sorts of areas, its food is also varied.

In dry and tropical regions, flowers and fruit are particularly important foods as they are needed for successful breeding.

How does it breed?

Most brushtails have a major autumn and minor spring breeding season. But those in tropical and dry areas will breed throughout the year if the necessary food is available.

A female brushtail has a forward-facing pouch containing two nipples and can breed after she is one-year-old.

She gives birth to a single baby 18 days after mating. The young will spend between four and five months in the pouch, attached to one teat.

Young possums spend another one to two months suckling and riding on the mother's back before being fully weaned.

Most young survive their time in the pouch, but a lot can die when they're 6-18 months of age. This is when the young leave the area of their birth and try to set up territories of their own.

Males aren't willing to share their space with younger males.

During the breeding period, brushtails become more territorial, as males use glands under their chin, on their chest and near the anus to scent-mark their territory.

Possums communicate through these scents and with sound through deep, guttural coughs and hisses.

Where is it seen?

You can see a brushtail possum in many cities and towns in Queensland.

Backyard spotlighting of brushtail possums is fun, especially when females with back-riding young move and feed in the trees.

Seeing these animals is a special experience for young children, who begin to care about conserving native wildlife from their own backyard.

Threats to survival

Like all native wildlife, the brushtail possum is protected in Queensland. Still common here, elsewhere in Australia many populations have disappeared and others have become vulnerable.

Before they were protected, brushtails were killed for their pelts.

In urban areas, deaths caused by dogs and cars are the greatest threats to the brushtail possum.