

## Building a Nestbox for Brushtail Possums

*This wildlife friendly information is sourced from members of Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers, members of other groups, independent advice, and research. We hope you find the information below useful, and it helps to answer your questions on this subject. If you have any further questions, please feel free to contact us by clicking this link: <http://www.tvwc.org.au/contact.php>*

Brushtail possums are found across Australia, particularly the Common Brushtail Possum which is a common visitor to our parks and gardens. Their preferred habitat is dry eucalypt forest where they feed mainly on leaves, and live in tree hollows.

Although the Common Brushtail is, as the name suggests, the most common Brushtail across Australia, there are various other subspecies, such as the Mountain Brushtail, or Bobuck, and the Coppery Brushtail, existing in different locations.

In the Tweed, the Mountain Brushtail possum is the common possum and the Common is actually uncommon!

Brushtails give birth to a single young in autumn or spring, and this develops in the pouch for 4 - 5 months before riding on Mum's back. Mortality is high once the young brushtails leave to establish their own home range. The majority of brushtails killed on our roads are young males leaving home.



Brushtails are very adaptable animals and, in the absence of suitable hollows, will nest in roofs and walls. Often householders want to be rid of them, but relocation is not the answer. To find out why, see our **Living with Possums** information sheet.

### The need for nestboxes

Natural tree hollows form when fungus and termites eat out the dead centre of old trees. Most Eucalypt species do not form these hollows until they are at least 100 years old. Although there are vast tracts of native plantation timber, particularly on the East Coast, they are typically harvested at around 60-80 years of age. So, of course, hollows do not form.

Since European settlement, literally millions of trees and hollows have been lost to urbanisation, industry, roads, and agriculture. As if that isn't bad enough, our struggling native animals have to compete with introduced Honey Bees and Indian Mynas, which aggressively colonise hollows.

These factors have led to some pretty desperate little critters trying to live in somewhat 'B grade' accommodation. Some examples are Sugar Gliders trying to live in the fronds of Banana trees; Feathertail Gliders turning up in the electricity boxes on top of power poles; Microbats trying to sleep in mailboxes; and our seldom seen little Antechinus trying to raise babies in sock drawers, and even kitchen stoves.

Far from ideal ... and is it any wonder that they end up living in house roofs!

### Benefits of nestboxes

As a result of the loss of natural hollows, and the growth of cities where there was once bush, there is an awful lot of displaced wildlife competing for an ever-decreasing amount of this prized real estate. This is where we can all really make a difference; in our suburban gardens, and rural properties.

A single well-placed nestbox, which survives, say ten years, can see a pair of Rosellas raise ten generations of chicks. A slightly different box could provide a secure home to six adult Sugar Gliders. A different shape again could provide a luxury home to that 'trouble-some' possum in your roof, whilst yet another shape provides five-star accommodation for up to 50 Microbats. And, when you consider that a single Microbat can consume one half it's own weight in insects a night, that's an awful lot less crawlies in your veggie patch. And, they provide this service completely free.

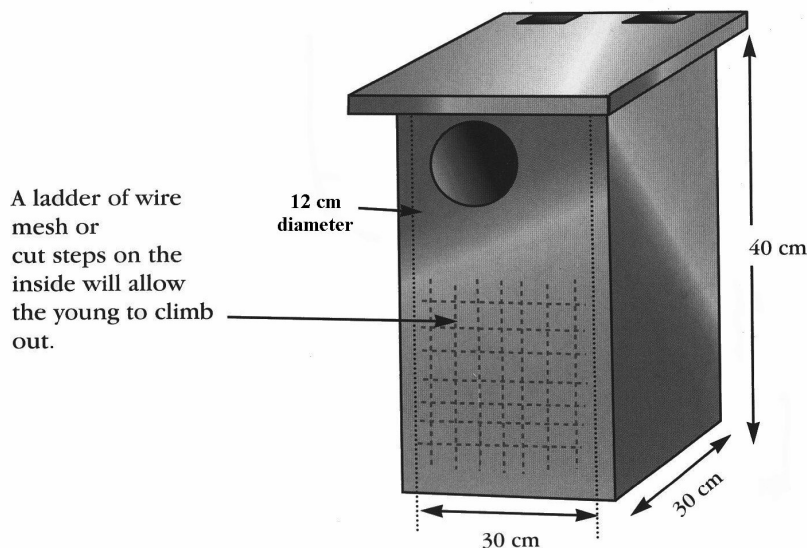
Nestboxes also provide priceless education for your children. Watching wildlife on TV is wonderful, but there is something very special about watching native animals coming and going, feeding, and raising their young so close to your home. If you've ever seen a Mountain Brushtail Possum looking out of her box at dusk, Pink nose resting on front paws, you'll know what I mean.

I grew up in the UK. One year my Grandfather decided to put up a nestbox in a pine tree in our garden. Next Spring a pair of Blue Tits moved in, and every year without fail, we used to watch from the comfort and warmth of the dining room, as that pair of birds raised four or five babies. From just 3 metres away, we'd watch the parents feeding the fledglings every few minutes, and seemingly just days later, watch the youngsters take their first tentative flights. What's more, the box only took ten minutes to put up.

Nestboxes are fun, easy and cheap to make and, once up, will provide a secure home for many years to come. However, be aware that putting up nestboxes which attract birds and mammals to your garden is a recipe for disaster if you own a cat.

## Construction

Below is a plan for the construction of a nestbox suitable for Common and Mountain Brushtail Possums. Materials used and notes are below the plan. Please note that all sizes marked are for **internal dimensions**.



The best materials for construction are either 3cm thick plantation pine or structural or external pine plywood. Rough-sawn or even secondhand timber is ideal, although you must make sure it is free of nails and paint.

Your box is best screwed, rather than nailed together. If using softwood, you will need to fill gaps, apply a coat of primer, undercoat and a dull acrylic finish.

The roof should be hinged, to allow opening and closing. It can either be hinged conventionally, or make an outside hinge out of a piece of old rubber tyre, run along the length of the hinged end. This also helps to make it weatherproof.

It is recommended that you screw a couple of off-cuts on the inside of the roof so that it sits snugly. Either mesh or a few thin strips of off-cut baton on the inside front will allow the youngsters to climb out.

It is important to drill a few 5mm drainage holes in the base. Lastly, throw a handful or two of wood shavings or leaf litter in the bottom.

## Installation

So you're now the proud owner of a new Brushtail Possum nestbox. Where to place it?

Choose your position carefully. Think about which side of your house takes the brunt of cold wind and driving rain. Face the nestbox entrance away from prevailing winds and make sure that the box will have plenty of shade during the hottest part of the day.

Hang the box from the chosen tree by a piece of wire threaded through a scrap piece of garden hose, so that it doesn't cut into the tree. Alternatively, nail the box to the tree using two strips of galvanised steel. The strips need only go halfway round the tree to allow for growth and to prevent ringbarking.

You will need to position the box at least 3 metres above the ground, but preferably higher.

So your new nestbox is in place, and you're sitting back with a beer or a cup of tea waiting for the homeless critters to move into their new home. Don't be disappointed or surprised if no one takes up residence immediately. It can sometimes take weeks or even months for a possum to show some interest.

The reasons for this include:

- The box is too new and unfamiliar. It looks and smells new and out of place. Give it time to 'weather in', to become part of the local landscape.
- Although possums live in hollows all year round, it is not until the parents actually kick the youngster out, that junior will go in search of a new home.

While you're waiting for the box to be occupied, please resist the temptation to keep looking inside. You don't know who's checking the box out when you're not looking, and constant disturbance will only discourage them. You'll know when the locals move in by watching, listening and by looking for droppings underneath.

Also, do not be alarmed if 'the wrong animal' moves into the nestbox. Hey, if an Eastern Rosella moves into the box you so carefully made for a Brushtail Possum... so be it. Obviously the Rosella's need was greater. Native animals will often move into the 'wrong sized' box.

## Maintenance

To finish off, just a few words on maintenance. Once a year, have a quick look to see if any repairs are required. Fill any gaps, give the nestbox a quick repaint, if necessary, and make sure that the box is still securely fastened to the tree. Also, watch that the fastening isn't been pulled apart by the growing tree.

Some introduced birds such as Sparrows, Starlings and Mynas have become a menace; driving native birds away, or even building their own nests on top of existing eggs or young. Nest-building by these species should be discouraged by removing nesting materials or eggs. If Indian Mynas are a continual problem, you may want to add a Myna baffle to the front of the box.

The introduced honeybee has also become a serious problem in some areas. They will readily colonise tree hollows, real or artificial. If you have a problem with bees, look up beekeepers in your Yellow Pages.

## A final word

Once your new box is occupied, please resist feeding the occupants. Feeding native wildlife is not a good idea. It fosters familiarity with humans and domestic animals. It encourages a dependency on an artificial food source, which will stop if you go on holiday, get sick or move away.

Also, local cats and dogs will cotton on to your feeding routine and this will put your native animals at risk. Animals are at their most vulnerable while feeding and are particularly at risk when they are encouraged down to your level to feed, rather than up in the canopy. You just don't know who is watching from the bushes.

**Please don't encourage your new residents to become cat-bait!**