

Living with 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>

Possum Species

There are three species of Possum we usually come across in the urban or rural environments of the Northern Rivers region of NSW:

- The Mountain Brushtail Possum, a large, dark grey to black possum found in a limited number of areas in NSW, but the most common possum in the Northern Rivers region.

Although males are solitary creatures, you will often find a female Mountain Brushtail with her female offspring, often as large as mum herself. The two or three females coexisting are sometimes mistakenly considered to be mum, dad and baby, but this is not so.

As seen here, this Mountain Brushtail Possum mum, on the right, is sharing the top of a cupboard with her daughter on the left (and a special treat from the householder who is chuffed to have them living there). If you look closely, you will see the nose of this year's joey, snuggled up between the two!



- The Common Brushtail Possum, although very common in most areas of NSW, is very uncommon in the Northern Rivers.

This possum is smaller than the Mountain Brushtail Possum, much greyer, with longer ears and pointier face. It is a rather cheeky and bold species.

It is the Common Brushtail Possum that is commonly-found in suburban areas of Brisbane, Sydney and other cities, but is quite uncommon in the Northern Rivers region of NSW.

- The Ringtail Possum, a shy possum, that lives socially with other possums of its species.

The Ringtail usually builds a nest or drey of twigs and leaves in dense foliage a few metres above the ground. It usually gives birth to two or three joeys.

They seldom enter house roofs, as they do not depend on tree hollows, whereas the Brushtail species make their home in naturally occurring tree hollows.



Why do Possums move into our homes?

The Brushtail possums are the ones that most often take up residence in our homes, the Common in cities such as Brisbane and Sydney, and the Mountain Brushtail through the Tweed and surrounding regions of NSW and south-east Queensland.

All species of possum are nocturnal; they sleep all day, and forage at night: Unlike the Ringtails which build their own drey homes, Brushtails depend on tree hollows for their homes.

As we've cleared the bush to make way for housing developments, we plant houses and imported trees. We leave very few old trees with hollows behind, and the possums, who were there first, have nowhere to go. They slowly get evicted.

Brushtails however are very adaptable, and sometimes solve their own housing problem... they simply move into ours. And that's where the problem begins.

So many people love possums, when they are outside, but when they move in, even the most ardent nature lover gets a bit frazzled. The comings and goings of a large Brushtail in the roof can, at 4 am, sound a bit like a herd of cattle break dancing above our heads.

The Brushtails don't stay in your roof during the night. Typically they come out just after dusk, stay out all night, feeding, mating, etc, returning before dawn to sleep for the day. If you are hearing noises in the roof all night, suspect rats!

Trapping is not a solution

Trapping and removal of the possum is not a solution because:

- Possums, like all other native animals, are protected in NSW. They must not be harmed in any way, and this includes trapping and relocating them. It goes without saying that shooting and poisoning are completely illegal.
- It seldom solves the problem, as another possum usually moves in to occupy the newly-vacated roof territory.
- Being territorial, Brushtail possums, especially males, will battle with other possums in the area in which they have been relocated. This may result in the possums becoming injured and even dying. A common disease called Stress Dermatitis may occur as a result of wounds sustained and the stress of the relocation.
- Relocated possums may displace other wildlife, such as parrots, owls or gliders, from hollows.
- Relocated possums are at high risk of being killed by cars, foxes or dogs.
- Research has shown that nearly 100% of relocated possums DIE within a very short space of time.



What you can do

- Check your roof to make sure it is, in fact, a possum that is living there and not rats or even lizards, and locate the access points into the roof. This includes any gaps in the roof or facias and identifying trees or other structures being used to climb up to the roof.
- Make or buy a nest box, and install it in your garden as an alternate den site for the possum, as has been done for this Mountain Brushtail, seen here with its head sticking out of its nest box.

(See our 'How to build a Nestbox for Brushtail Possums' fact sheet)

This is very unlikely to attract other brushtails. When your roof-dwelling possum adopts the nestbox, it is likely to keep all others away from your garden and roof as Brushtails are very territorial.

- If the possum has built a nest in your roof, locate this at night and remove it. Place it inside the new possum-box to encourage it to move in to the new location. You could also try putting a little fruit such as apple or banana into the possum-box to encourage it to investigate.
- Place collars made from aluminium or sheet iron, up to 1.5 metres up around the trunks of trees being used to access the roof. Also lop any overhanging branches or those which lead to the roof.
- Spread camphor blocks or mothballs in the roof – not both – to repel the possum as they really dislike these smells. You can also place a light in the roof and leave it on for three days and nights. The combination of light, smells, and an attractive alternative home, should, hopefully, do the trick.
- Once you are sure the possums have left your roof, block off the known-entrance points and wipe around these points with household bleach to remove possum scent.
- Enjoy living with your local possums!



Is trapping necessary?

Sometimes it may be necessary to trap the possum while the roof is being repaired. If this is the case, you should contact Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers if you live in the Tweed, or other licensed wildlife rescue group in your area, or the local National Parks & Wildlife Service.

A possum trap will need to be set up and, once caught, the possum will need to be kept in care until the roof has been repaired and any other work done. Possum boxes will need to be put up also.

In almost all cases, the trapped possum will be released on your property at dusk, so it is important to have blocked up all entry points, and to provide the alternate lodgings.

One advantage is that the possum, once settled into its new possum box, will claim your backyard as territory and keep other possums away from your house.

Possums on our roads

Unfortunately, many possums die on our roads each night. Being marsupials, possum joeys may be tucked up inside their mother's pouch, having survived the road trauma. Or a back-young, still totally dependent upon its mother, will be nearby in the bushes, wondering what is wrong with its mum.

A joey can live for days in a dead mother's pouch, slowly dying of dehydration and hunger on the side of the road.

Apart from driving in a 'wildlife friendly' manner, you should:

- Stop whenever you see dead marsupials on the road. If female, check its pouch for a joey or for signs of lactation.

Take note of the size and colour of the possum as, if it is a Ringtail Possum, it may have up to three joeys.

- If there is a joey, and it is still attached to the teat, do not pull it off but keep it in the pouch of its dead mother until help arrives. Otherwise, remove the joey and keep it warm. This means artificial heat, eg a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel, and layers of wool or cotton – they need to be kept at around 32 degrees C. Do not feed it or give it anything to drink.
- If there are signs of lactation, but no joey, look all around the area. Sometimes you may need to move the body of the dead possum a little off the road and stand back and wait for the joey to come back to its mum.
- Call the nearest wildlife rescue organisation immediately, taking note of exactly where the animal was found. The wildlife group will ensure that a carer who is trained to rescue and raise possums will take the joey into care, providing it with the correct milk formula, heating requirements, etc. This young Mountain Brushtail Possum was lucky to have a member of Tweed Valley Wildlife Carers rescue raise it, and to be released several months later in a safe forested area.
- If there is no sign of a joey, or the animal is a male, move it well off the road. Dead animals tend to attract predators, which may become traffic statistics themselves.

