

Possums – Damage Prevention and Control

Identification, Distribution and Behaviour

Possums are mostly arboreal (tree-living) marsupials native to Australia. Possums are largely nocturnal; spending the majority of the daytime asleep in hollows or similar refuges and emerging after sunset to forage for food. They are mostly herbivorous, feeding on a variety of leaves, flowers, fruits, and fungi. The common brushtail possum *Trichosurus vulpecula* and the western ringtail possum *Pseudocheirus occidentalis* are the only two large possums that naturally occur in Western Australia's forests and woodlands. Due to urban growth, both species have also adapted to live in urban areas.

Refer to www.naturemap.dpaw.wa.gov.au to find further information on the species distribution.

Common brushtail possums are 35-55cm in body length and weigh between 1.2-4.5kg. The body fur is generally silver-grey with a white to pale grey belly. The ears are long and oval shaped. The tail varies between bushy and more sparsely furred with a black or white tip.

Western ringtail possums are 30-40cm in body length and, weighing between 0.7-1.2kg, are generally about half the size of a brushtail possum. The body fur is a dark chocolate brown to dark grey with a white or grey belly. It is characterised by its short-furred and white-tipped tail which is as long as or longer than the rest of its body. Further information on the western ringtail possum is available on the species' webpage on the [Department's website](#).



Common brushtail possum can have black or white tails, some less bushy than others.

Photos: A. Wayne/DBCA (left); M. Hovens (right)



Western ringtail possums have long, short-furred tails with white tips that have little to no fur.

Photos: P. Courtis/DBCA (left); A. Wayne/DBCA (right)

The two types of possums can be confused with each other, especially because both use their tails to hold onto branches. Therefore, when trying to figure out which species of possum you have seen, remember that western ringtail possums are smaller in size, have shorter and usually dark fur, have smaller ears and have shorter-haired tails that are proportionally longer to their body length than brushtail possums.

If you think you have seen a western ringtail possum, which is a Critically Endangered species, fill out a [report form](#) and email it with a photo and/or a description of the possum to fauna@dbca.wa.gov.au.

Environmental Law

All fauna native to Australia, including fauna that naturally migrates to Australia, are afforded protection under both State and Commonwealth legislation. Under both State and Commonwealth legislation, the western ringtail possum *Pseudocheirus occidentalis* is recognised as Threatened fauna and is listed as Critically Endangered.

Depending on the type of fauna-related activity, a licence issued by the Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions may be required. It is an offence to intentionally or recklessly kill, injure, trade, keep or move them unless

authorised by a permit. Further information is available on the Department's website.

Possum-Human Interactions

Both species of possums have adapted to urban and suburban habitats, and are known to seek shelter and food in gardens and buildings. Most of the time, possums and humans co-exist without any problems, especially because it provides a rare opportunity to see native wildlife in urban areas. However, in some situations, possums, particularly brushtail possums, can be a nuisance when making lots of noise at night, damaging or fouling property with their droppings and urine, heavily grazing on ornamental plants or fruit trees in gardens, and nesting inside roof spaces.

If you find a sick or injured possum contact the [Wildcare Helpline](#) on (08) 9474 9055 for information on registered wildlife rehabilitators and centres.

Disease Risk

Similar to other wildlife, possums can carry viruses, and as they are wild animals, they may bite and scratch when injured or afraid. Only trained and licenced personnel should handle possums.

Damage Prevention and Control

The best means for preventing or controlling damage to property by possums is by preventing access and/or providing alternate nesting sites. Scaring techniques are not effective, shooting of possums is not permitted, and culling and other population control methods are not effective, humane or ecologically sound. Relocations of animals to solve human-animal conflicts are often found to be largely unsuccessful, and because possums can die from predation and stress soon after release, relocations are not considered a humane means of control.

Checking if it's a Possum

Prior to undertaking any damage prevention and control methods, it is useful to double check whether it is a possum that is actually responsible for the problem. Some reptiles and other native mammals, such as goannas and phascogales, also make scratching, chewing and skittering noises. Rats and mice are also often mistaken for possums, as they often live in roof cavities, especially in winter when they are looking for dry and warm shelter.

The easiest way to distinguish between rats, mice and possums is to look for their droppings. Possum scats are the largest (usually more than 2cm long), compared to the dropping of rats (about 1.5cm long) and mice (less than 1cm long).

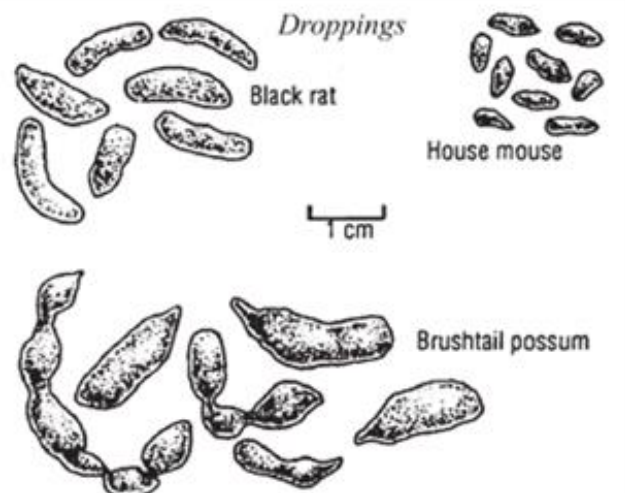
If you are using poison bait to get rid of rats or mice and you think possums may also be present, place the bait inside a polypipe (1m long, 50mm diameter) secured to a beam in the roof space. The pipe should prevent the possums from accessing the bait.

Preventing Access in Houses

Preventing access is the most effective way of controlling damage caused by possums nesting in a roof cavity. Block all access points securely with sheet metal, wood or wire netting, except for the entry point that the possum has been observed using. After sunset, the possum will leave the roof space using the remaining entry point. While it is foraging for food outside, block the remaining entry point before it can return. Permanent repairs can be made during daylight hours after it is clear that the possum has not returned. It will be clear if the possum is trapped inside by its noisy attempts to escape.

Once the possum has been excluded from the building, thoroughly wash all access points with a disinfectant to disguise the scent trails that the possum left behind.

Providing an alternative nesting site, such as a hollow log blocked at one end or a home-made possum nesting box,



Comparison of droppings. Image: [DPIPWE](#)

may encourage possums to remain in the area without nesting inside and damaging buildings. There are a range of resources available on the internet about building nest boxes.

Preventing Access in Gardens

Possums, both western ringtail and common brushtail, will often forage for food in gardens, eating a variety of native, fruit and ornamental plants. If possums are causing damage to your garden plants, the most effective measure of controlling damage is to prevent them from accessing the garden. Possums can only jump about 1m high and cannot climb sheer walls, so a 1.5m tall tin fence should keep possums out.

Alternatively, modifications can prevent a possum from climbing over an existing fence. Piping around the top rung of a wire fence will spin whenever a possum grips it, so that it can't get purchase and climb over. A wire mesh (chicken wire) 'floppy-top' can be added, using high tensile wire to affix the floppy mesh to the existing fence so that it overhangs on the outside. The 'floppy-top' will bend under the weight of a possum as it climbs up and the instability will prevent the possum from climbing over. There are lots of different floppy fence designs available on the internet.

Fitting sheet metal collars around tree trunks and removing low branches will prevent possums from climbing up and gaining access to roofs and fenced gardens. Removing branches that overhang buildings, vehicles and patios can also reduce fouling from possum droppings.

Using a closed compost system and removing any leftover pet food at night will also make your garden less attractive to possums.

Related Information Sheets

Department Information Sheet: [Fauna Profile – Western Ringtail Possum](#)

Citation

Department of Biodiversity, Conservation and Attractions. (2017). *Fauna Notes – Possums – Damage Prevention and Control*. Retrieved from <http://www.dbca.wa.gov.au/>

Disclaimer

The State of Western Australia and its employees do not guarantee that this publication is without flaw of any kind or is wholly appropriate for your particular purposes and therefore disclaims all liability for any error, loss or other consequence that may arise from you relying on any information in this publication.