



Northern and Yorke Region Common Brushtail Possum and Box Mistletoe



Conservation status

Due to a marked range contraction, the Common Brushtail Possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) is listed as rare under the State National Parks and Wildlife Act (1972).

Description

The Common Brushtail Possum is a cat-sized possum with an adult body mass of about 2.4 to 2.9 kilograms. Adult males tend to be larger than adult females. Distinguishing features of the Common Brushtail Possum include its black bushy tail and long oval ears. The dense fur of these possums varies from light to dark grey in colour.

Distribution

Once common throughout much of South Australia, including the Mid North, the range of the Common Brushtail Possum has contracted by more than 90% and it is now listed as rare for the State, and vulnerable in the Mid North and on Yorke Peninsula. Due to a lack of natural nesting areas, the possum is now mostly seen in and around the major towns where it utilises artificial nesting areas, such as roof cavities and sheds.

Threatening processes

An important factor in the decline in range and population size of the Common Brushtail Possum is habitat loss. Habitat degradation has also played a large role, in particular the lack of nesting sites, due to the removal of the old hollow bearing trees. Other factors include; habitat fragmentation, urbanisation, and predation by foxes, dogs and cats, as well as past hunting. The loss of understorey layers within its habitat may also be a contributing factor.

Current threats in the Mid North include the continued fragmentation of the landscape and expansion of urban areas, as well as predation.

Possums and Mistletoe

Staff from the Northern and Yorke Region of the Department for Environment and Heritage, in conjunction with the Mistletoe Action Group, are currently investigating whether increasing the number of possums (by providing nest boxes) will result in the control of "over-abundant" Box Mistletoe (*Amyema miquelii*) in the Clare Valley.

Mistletoe plants are an important food source for native wildlife.

Mistletoe plants grow on a host tree. However, when the Mistletoe plants become over-abundant, this is often an indicator for an ecosystem that is out of balance. The Common Brushtail Possum, a consumer of the Mistletoe plant, might play an important role in maintaining the balance of Mistletoe plants, through the consumption of leaves and flowers. Other consumers include butterfly larvae.

The grassy woodlands of the Clare and Gilbert Valleys, in the Mid North of the State, carry a heavy burden of Box Mistletoe, which can place already unhealthy trees under additional stress. Mistletoe plants can contribute to declining tree health by placing the host trees under heavy water and resource stress.

Conservation and recovery

Completed

- Baseline spotlight surveys for Common Brushtail Possums at four sites in the Clare Valley.

On-going

- Annual Common Brushtail Possum population monitoring.
- Collection of historic and current distributional records.
- Raising and maintaining community awareness about the species.

Future

- Placement of nest boxes at one of the four Clare Valley sites, to assess whether the availability of nest boxes increases the number of possums in the area.



Box Mistletoe

Program support

- Northern and Yorke Natural Resources Management Board
- Natural Heritage Trust
- Private landholders
- Mistletoe Action Group
- Biodiversity and Endangered Species Team

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