

# Possums and Gardens

## Living with Possums in South Australia

With a reduction in natural habitats due to urbanisation, native animals are often forced to live in close quarters with humans. The opportunity to observe native wildlife in your own backyard cannot be overstated; however, living with wildlife has its share of problems too.

This information aims to help solve problems that possums may be causing to your property. You will find a list of common questions and solutions to possum problems. If you still have questions or your problem is not covered please contact your local Department for Environment and Heritage office.

This information relates specifically to the Common Brushtail Possum and Common Ringtail Possum, the species most commonly encountered in natural and urban environments.

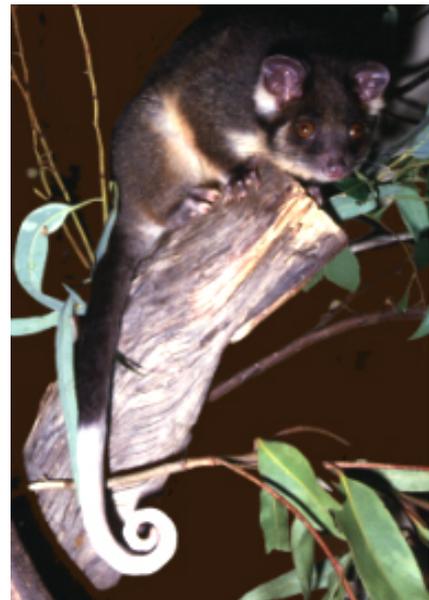
### Possums

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Possums are nocturnal animals. Finding shelter and nesting sites is becoming the biggest challenge for these native animals. With the removal of many large old gum trees, possums have to seek shelter in other areas. For Common Brushtail Possums one common alternative is buildings with access to the roof space. Common Ringtail Possums rarely enter a building roof, instead this species builds a nest, or drey, in amongst the dense foliage of trees or shrubs and several metres above the ground.



*Common Brushtail Possum  
(Photo: Scott Jennings, DEH)*



*Common Ringtail Possum  
(Photo: Peter Canty, DEH)*

### Common Brushtail Possum

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Common Brushtail Possums are approximately the size of a domestic cat. Males are generally larger than females. These possums have dense fur, which varies in colour from light to dark grey on the back and a creamy coloured belly. The distinguishing features of the Common Brushtail Possum are the black bushy tail and the long ears (50-60mm).

### Common Ringtail Possum

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The Common Ringtail Possum is a shy animal that has adapted its behaviour to live in urban environments with humans and their gardens, making use of ornamental native plants and introduced fruits and flowers.

A smaller animal in size, the fur on the Common Ringtail Possum is not dense but light to dark grey with a creamy coloured belly. It has a softer looking face with rounder ears that have a white patch behind each ear. It has a tapering white tail, which is not bushy like the Common Brushtail Possum.

## **Conservation status of Common Brushtail and Common Ringtail Possums in South Australia**

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The Department for Environment and Heritage has identified that the Common Brushtail Possum has suffered a significant decline in abundance and reduction in its range across South Australia and suspects that these trends are continuing.

Although Common Brushtail Possum populations appear to be secure within the Greater Adelaide Region, Mount Lofty Ranges and Kangaroo Island, the Department for Environment and Heritage has reviewed the status of these species and recommended that the Common Brushtail Possum be listed as rare on *the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972* Threatened Species Schedules in 2005. The Common Ringtail Possum remains common across its range.

## **Possums and the law**

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### **Are possums protected?**

In South Australia, **all possums are protected** (i.e. safeguarded against collecting, hunting or other activities) under the provisions of the National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1972.

### **I have a possum on my property. What can I do?**

If the possum is not causing a problem then there is no need to act. Enjoy the opportunity to observe native wildlife on your property but remember possums are wild animals.

If the possum is causing a problem, assess the nature and extent of the problem before deciding whether there is any need to take action. You have a legal responsibility to deal with a possum problem in a humane manner. Managing the problem will involve a time commitment, often some monetary cost and altered practices. Combining a range of deterrents simultaneously should reduce or eliminate the impacts.

Destruction of animals is unlikely to solve your problem, is a very time consuming process and will only provide short-term relief. Look for longer-term solutions to control damage, rather than killing the possums.

### **Can I destroy a Brushtail Possum myself?**

**No.** Possums can be destroyed only if a destruction permit has been issued by the Department for Environment and Heritage. Please note that a permit to trap and destroy possums will be granted only if the applicant has tried all other means of resolving the conflict situation.

The humane destruction of Brushtail Possums can be facilitated by registered veterinarians, the Animal Welfare League, and animal research facilities that hold a current scientific permit and animal ethics approval (contact the Department for Environment and Heritage Research Permits Section on telephone 8124 4725 for details).

Pest controllers are not issued with a permit to trap and destroy (destruction permit). However, pest controllers can arrange for the destruction of possums on behalf of a landholder only in situations where the landholder has obtained a trap and destroy (destruction) permit from the Department for Environment and Heritage.



*Common Brushtail Possum  
(Photo: Scott Jennings, DEH)*

## Possums and gardens

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### **Possums are destroying my garden – can I trap them?**

Possums should only be trapped if they are living in buildings.

### **What can I do to stop possums destroying my garden?**

Is it really a problem? Are possums eating all the fruit, roses, etc? Remember possums are trying to survive in urban environments with fewer natural areas and food sources.

Possum deterrents for the garden

- Plant some trees that will supply the possums with an alternative food source. This may encourage possums to keep away from the more precious plants in your garden or at least reduce the impacts they may be causing.
- Spray the plant with a bitter product, such as quassia chips, minced garlic or chilli flakes, that have been boiled and made into a liquid spray.
- Spread camphor or naphthalene flakes around the garden. These products have a bitter taste.
- Trim back tree branches from fences so they do not have a clear runway. Possums will jump, but not huge distances.
- Remove all fallen fruit. Removing this food source forces the possum to find food elsewhere.
- Do not feed possums. Remember, possums are wild animals and the best food for them is natural food they find themselves.

### **Possums are damaging my garden and eating fruit from my trees. What can I do to stop them?**

There are simple steps that can be taken to reduce possum damage to your garden:

- Place sheet metal collars, 60cm wide and 60cm above the ground, around tree trunks of fruit trees.
- Build a floppy fence around your ornamental or vegetable garden. Use 80cm wide, heavily galvanised chicken wire, bury the bottom 20cm and support the remainder on vertical lengths of flexible, high-tensile fencing wire. Bend the wire to curve the upper section outwards. When the possum attempts to climb the fence it will bend over and then spring back.

The effectiveness of possum repellents is variable. These could be used in conjunction with other recommended deterrent measures listed above.

## Relocating possums

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### **I have always taken possums away and they always come back. Why?**

It is highly unlikely that the possum you relocated has returned. The possum you relocated will have died under very stressful circumstances.

Possums are part of the natural and urban environment and are territorial. Relocating a possum will not solve your problem. It simply means that a possum territory (which includes your property with highly sought after nest and food sites) will be vacant for only a short period of time before another possum arrives.

### **If possum numbers are declining why can't I release the possum down the road or in a park or reserve?**

Yes, the Common Brushtail Possum has suffered a significant reduction in its range across South Australia particularly in regional mainland South Australia. Unfortunately, the solution is not as simple as releasing a trapped possum down the road, or into a park or reserve. Possums are territorial and studies have found that possums released into another possum's territory usually die within a few days due to stress, fighting and starvation. It is not humane to release possums this way. Relocating possums may also spread disease if the animal is sick.

Possums have declined in regional areas due to fox and cat predation, habitat fragmentation through urbanisation and other land management practices and the loss of suitable refuge sites and natural food sources. Relocating possums to these regional areas is impractical, as they would not survive. Australia has lost many of its native animals through habitat destruction and disease. Please help protect what remaining species we do have left.

## Other possum problems

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**I have possums in my yard and they are urinating and leaving droppings, which smells and I continually have to clean up. What can I do?**

If the possum droppings are found beneath a tree that overhangs your paved areas, for example, trim back the tree branches or prevent access to the tree.

Locate and destroy all scent markings by applying a household bleach to the affected areas

Find out what is attracting the possum to your backyard. Perhaps there is a ready food supply (e.g. dog food, fruit trees, vegetable or ornamental garden, compost bin, birdseed left on a bird feeding tray)).

It is also worthwhile checking to see if these problems are being caused by rats (droppings) or cats (spraying).

## Who can I contact?

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If you require further information on managing and living in harmony with possums please visit the DEH biodiversity website <http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/biodiversity/>

To obtain a permit please visit the DEH website <http://www.wildlifepermitsa.gov.au> or contact your nearest Department for Environment and Heritage office.