

POSSUMS IN OUR AREA – DO YOU KNOW THE DIFFERENCE?

... *Peter Crowcroft, Eco-Logic Education and Environment Services*

... *Drawings by Kaye Traynor*

This month we will have a look at a group of animals that really characterise the Australian bush. Two are well-known, nighttime visitors to our backyards, and one is much harder to find.

Common Ringtail Possum *Pseudocheirus peregrinus*

Pseudocheirus peregrinus is a small, arboreal (tree dwelling) marsupial, common from the rainforests of Cape York to the southern temperate forests, and many urban gardens in between. It is one of the few Australian marsupials to be successful at colonising human environs. Although it almost exclusively eats eucalypt leaves in its natural habitat, the comparatively palatable rose buds and fruit tree leaves are greatly favoured in the urban jungle. Running through the canopy or along powerlines with agility, Ringtails use their prehensile tail as a balancing appendage, and also use it to grip branches while they stretch out for hard-to-reach leaves. Once acquired, a ringtail will rip off the leaf, grip it with the front paws and smell it. If it passes the sniff test, it is rapidly and thoroughly chewed, four times a second. Eucalypt leaves are so nutritionally poor that caecotrophy may be used to get the most out of every leaf (the re-ingestion of scats).



Common Ringtail Possum

Common Brushtail Possum *Trichosurus vulpecula*

More generalist in its diet than a Ringtail, *Trichosurus vulpecula* will eat a variety of leaves, grasses, herbs and fruits, and just about anything



Common Brushtail Possum

on your compost heap. Contrary to popular belief, insects are usually only found in trace amounts in the analysis of Brushtail scats, if at all. This species has also successfully adapted to urban areas, thus it is a common, but usually unwelcome, roof occupant in homes. One creative way to evict a possum may be to play raucous, loud music throughout the day, but make sure you install a comfortable nest box in a tree outside. Fiercely territorial, males will fight, and a cacophony of hissing and growling will result during the mating season, and after young males have weaned and are looking for their own territory. The sexually active males have obvious red staining on their chest from scent gland secretions.

Eastern Pygmy Possum *Cercartetus nanus*

Difficult to find, *Cercartetus nanus* feeds on the pollen and

nectar from a range of plant species, but especially favours the Banksias, Eucalypts and Xanthorrhoea when flowering. They are also known to make use of the habitat that the dead, older fronds of a grass-tree provide. Unlike the previous possums, this species does supplement its diet with a variety of insects, such as moths and beetles. They are found in this area, with recent sightings at Distillery Creek, Urquhart Bluff and Moggs Creek. Weighing an average of just 24 grams and having a total length of less than 20 cm long, you can be forgiven for not finding these on your last nocturnal venture. They are especially difficult to see at this time of year, when they begin a torpor phase that will last most of winter.



Eastern Pygmy Possum

References:

Kerle, A. 2001, *Possums, The Brushtails, Ringtails and Greater Glider*, Australian Natural History Series, UNSW Press

Strahan, R. (ed) 1983 *The Australian Museum Complete Book of Australian Mammals*, Angus & Robertson,

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