

the western ringtail possum

A threatened species in our backyards...



Western Ringtail
Action Group



Endangered or Abundant? Debunking a local myth...

Residents of the Busselton and Dunsborough urban areas frequently encounter local possums, giving the impression they are an abundant and healthy population. But when we consider that their habitat, the Quindalup vegetation complex has been reduced to 33% of its original land cover (WALGA) to make way for housing and industrial development, the possums have little choice but to find shelter in people's rooves and sheds, backyard trees and remaining peppermint woodlands. In fact, like the Whale Shark, the Red Panda and the Polar Bear, the Western Ringtail Possum is listed internationally as a threatened species (IUCN).

The Western Ringtail Possum

The Western Ringtail Possum, *Pseudocheirus occidentalis*, is a small marsupial, which is native to the southwest region of Western Australia. The Western Ringtail Possum was once widely spread across the south west land area from Perth to Albany. However, due to extensive land clearing for agriculture and urban development, the Western Ringtail Possum has now declined to less than 10% of its original geographical range. Busselton and Dunsborough urban areas support one of the last major populations of Ringtails. Protection of the Ringtails within the coastal strip from Busselton to Dunsborough is therefore essential for the survival of the species.



The Western Ringtail Possum is also classified by national conservation agencies as threatened. In Australia the ringtail is listed under the *State Wildlife Conservation Act 1950* and the *Commonwealth Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999* as threatened and vulnerable to extinction within 10 years.

Why are Western Ringtails threatened in Dunsborough & Busselton?

- Removal of Peppermint trees from private property
- Land clearing for agriculture and urban development
- Excessive pruning of Peppermint trees disrupting the connectivity of the tree canopy
- Logging and burning of south-west forests
- Predation by feral cats and foxes
- Attacks from domestic cats and dogs
- Killed by traffic while crossing roads in search of food & habitat
- Poisoning by rat and snail bait
- Relocation to unsuitable habitat
- Summer/hot fires burning tree canopies and habitat.
- Diseases such as toxoplasmosis, carried by cats and other mammals.

What do Western Ringtails look like?

The Western Ringtail Possum is a medium-sized nocturnal marsupial up to 1.3 kg in weight and approximately 40 cm in body length. The fur is dark brown above with cream to grey fur underneath. The tail grows to 41 cm long and has a white tip. The western ringtail possum can be distinguished from the Common Brushtail Possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) by its smaller rounded ears and thin prehensile tail, which is as long as its body (DEWHA).





What do they eat?

Western ringtails eat peppermint leaves (*Agonis flexuosa*) and other native leaves such as jarrah (*Eucalyptus marginata*), marri (*Corymbia calophylla*) and local native plants such as Melaleucas and wattle species (*Acacia sp*) (DEC).

In urban areas possums also feed on a variety of garden species including rose bush leaves and flowers, and a variety of cultivated fruits.

A Western Ringtail's home

Western ringtails are nocturnal. They are active at night and sleep during the day often in dreys (nests). The possums build their dreys in the canopy of Peppermint trees [and other trees] with twigs and leaves they collect using their prehensile tails. Ringtails are also known to nest in hollows of large old trees or in the undergrowth where it is particularly dense and provides protection from predators. In urban areas possums sometimes nest in house or shed rooves when there are suitable openings for them to get in.

How to live happily with possums:

The Western Ringtail Possum is an iconic species in the Busselton and Dunsborough areas. Living so closely with wildlife offers many important opportunities to experience nature but can sometimes cause problems too. Here are some tips to find a happy balance.

- 1) Learn to appreciate your local wildlife such as possums.
- 2) Learn to love native gardening – unlike roses and other exotic species, native plants are suited to the local soil type and climate and have less chance of being negatively affected by possums.

Possums have a particular liking to new rose buds and shoots and can often feast on these overnight. There are numerous attractive spring and summer flowering native species that will also brighten up your garden

- 3) Seal house eaves and install one or more possum boxes in your yard to provide an alternative habitat for the possums to encourage them not to nest in your roof.



Domestic Cat with dead possum – Remember to lock domestic animals in at night
(Photo: Mosman Council)

- 4) Keep pets indoors at night – domestic dogs and cats have a huge impact on the local possums. Even a harmless scratch from a cat can kill a possum quickly from infection.
- 5) Possums prefer to eat native leaves rather than roses – give possums an alternative food source to your roses or fruit trees by:
 - Preventing further loss of native vegetation by retaining peppermint trees on your property.
 - Planting new peppermint trees or other native plants in your garden.
 - Planting peppermint trees along the verge. For more information about planting trees on your verge contact the Shire of Busselton.
- 6) As a last resort - there are some deterrents available such as netting, security lighting and chemical deterrents. However, all of these options can be costly and may have negative outcomes for the possums, your neighbours or other wildlife such as birds. Ask one of the authorities for more advice before using deterrents (see back of this brochure for more details).

Ringtails in the roof?

It is illegal to catch or trap Ringtails. A \$10,000 fine applies. If you have one in your roof, the best way to encourage the possum to find a new home is to wait until the evening when it comes out to feed. Whilst they are out, block all potential access points to the roof. Useful materials include sheet metal, vinyl,

A basic Possum box design

(Living with Possums - DEC)



Baton attached to back for fixing to tree with 100mm galvanised nails, screws or plastic coated wire, 3-6m from ground. Hinged-lid and overhanging sides by 25mm

Hole= 100mm diameter, near top and to one side

Height of sides 550mm at rear, 400mm at front;

Width of front and back panel = 300mm

Depth = 250mm

wood or wire netting with a mesh size smaller than 20mm, which should be fitted securely and snugly to prevent a possum from getting a claw hold and lifting the cover off the hole (Living with Possums Brochure, Land For Wildlife, DEC, 2009).

Nest boxes can be placed in trees around the area to provide alternative nests or to encourage possums out of rooves and sheds. These may be simple hollow logs with one end blocked, or specially designed waterproof wooden box constructions, placed about four metres above the ground, perhaps in the fork of a tree, but facing south or south-east away from the sun.

Trapping of fauna is illegal; contact your Busselton Department of Environment and Conservation office for further advice on 97525 555.

Why can't we just translocate the possums out of town and into the bush?

Possums are strongly territorial and easily stressed. The relocation of possums to other sites is not a viable option since studies have shown the survival rate of relocated possums is very low. Most are killed by predation or driven away by other territorial possums into unsuitable habitat where they most certainly perish.



Dying Peppermint trees in Busselton (Photo: C.Kemp DEC Busselton)

This is why it is so important to replace the loss of peppermint trees by planting new ones in our front and back gardens, along our road verges and in urban bushland.

Peppermint tree decline

Along with the ringtail's most pressing threat of urbanisation and land clearing, peppermint trees - the possums' homes - are becoming increasingly unhealthy and are in decline. Visible symptoms include yellowing of the leaves followed by a dying back and eventual death of the whole tree. The decline of the peppermint tree seems to affect trees within a wide range of ages and across different landscapes and is having an associated impact of possums through further loss of habitat and food.

How to spot Western Ringtails

The easiest way to find out if there are western ringtails in the area is to check for scats under trees and look for dreys in the canopy. At night take a torch and explore the canopies, looking out for shinning red-orange eyes and listening out for rustles in the branches and roof-tops.



Where to see a Ringtail Possum

Why not find out how many possums are in your local park? Take a torch and explore.

Where? Parks in Busselton and Dunsborough:

Wonnerup

- Captain Baudin's Reserve (Layman Road)
- Geographe
- Guerin Street Reserve (Guerin Street)
- Longlands Park (Willmott)
- Wilmott Park (Cookworthy Street)

Busselton

- Barnard Park (between Georgette St and Ford Road)
- Mitchell Park (Prince Street)
- Breedan Park (Peel Terrace)

West Busselton

- Hospital Foreshore (Foreshore Bicycle Path, Mill Road)
- Lou Western Oval (King Street)
- Glenleigh Road Reserve (Glenleigh Road)
- Hale Street Reserve (Hale Street)
- Dolphin Park (Kingfisher Blvd)

Broadwater

- Lions Park (Barnard Road)
- Minion Park (Little Collins Street)

Abby

- Unnamed Reserve (Cabarita Road)

Kealy

- Locke Nature Reserve (Caves Road)

Siesta Park

- Siesta Park Reserve (Siesta Park Road)
- Ambergate: Ambergate Reserve (Queen Elizabeth Avenue)
- Quindalup: (Caves Road, next to Quindalup Fauna Park)

Dunsborough

- Melaleuca Park and Rivergum Place (Dugalup Brook pathway, Gifford Rd)
- Centennial Park (Foreshore walk, Geographe Bay Road)
- Meelup Regional Park (Meelup Beach Road)

Identifying different species

Western Ringtail Possum



Quenda (Photo: DEC)



Common Brushtail Possum



Brushtail-Phascogale (Photo: DEC)



What can we do to save the Western Ringtail Possum?

- Plant food for possums in your garden such as *Acacia saligna*
- Prevent clearing of habitat and retain peppermint trees on Shire, Crown and private land.
- Improve planning of urban areas so that more habitat is retained.
- Manage bushland sensitively
- Revegetate habitat corridors to reconnect fragmented bushland
- Revegetate with peppermint trees in suitable areas
- Ensure community members are responsible owners of cats and dogs
- Increase public awareness about the vulnerable status of the Ringtails
- Get involved! Volunteer with one of the local organisations working towards saving our ringtails.

If you would like to get involved in protecting Ringtails, contact one of the local organisations (see back for details).

For injured or orphaned animals:

For any injured or sick wildlife found, please try to wrap them in a towel or put them in a box or bag and take them straight to a vet for examination. In most cases the vet will not charge and when able to, and will hand them over to a carer for rehabilitation and release.

For more advice contact:

- Fostering Assistance for Wildlife Needing Aid Inc (FAWNA Inc): www.fawna.com.au
- Wildcare Helpline: 9474 9055
- Department of Environment and Conservation: 9752 5555
- Busselton Shire ranger: 9781 0444
- The Possum Centre Inc. - www.possumcentre.com.au

For more information or to find out about volunteering contact:

- GeoCatch: 9781 0111, www.geocatch.asn.au
- Busselton and Dunsborough Environment Centre 9754 2049
- Busselton and Dunsborough Volunteers 9754 2047

For advice and help with revegetation or home gardens contact:

- GeoCatch: 9781 0111
- Geographe Community Landcare Nursery 0429 644 885
- Dunsborough Coast & Landcare Inc: 9755 3384
- Toby Inlet Catchment Group Inc: 9755 3384
- Land For Wildlife - Department of Environment and Conservation: 97525533.

Acknowledgements:

We gratefully acknowledge the use of BDEC's (Busselton & Dunsborough Environment Centre) "The Western Ringtail Possum" brochure (2008) as a source of reference.

References:

- DEC. Department of Environment and Conservation
- DEWHA. Department of Environment, Water, Heritage & the Arts
- IUCN. International Union for Conservation of Nature. Red List of Threatened Species
- WALGA. Western Australian Local Government Association.

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