

the western ringtail possum

An endangered species in our backyard...



Western Ringtail
Action Group



What do Western Ringtail Possums look like?

The Western Ringtail Possum is a nocturnal marsupial up to 1.3kg in weight and approximately 40cm in body length. The fur is dark brown above with cream to grey fur underneath. The tail grows to 41cm in length and has a white tip. The Western Ringtail 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).

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 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 has now declined to less than 10% of its original geographical range. Protection of the Western Ringtails within the South West region is therefore essential for the survival of the species.

Western ringtails using a rope bridge. Check out the possum bridge across Bussell Hwy in Abbey next time you are driving past.



Why are Western Ringtail Possums threatened in the South West?

- 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 and 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 they eat?

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

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

Endangered or Abundant? Debunking a local myth...

Some residents of the South West frequently encounter local Western Ringtail, giving the impression they are an abundant and healthy population. But when we consider that their habitat in the Quindalup vegetation complex has been reduced to 33% of its original land cover (WALGA) to make way for housing and industrial development, the Western Ringtails have little choice but to find shelter in people's roofs and sheds, backyard trees and remaining peppermint woodlands. In fact, like the Whale Shark, the

A Western Ringtail Possum's home

Western Ringtails are nocturnal (active at night) and sleep during the day often in dreys (nests). They build their dreys in the canopy of Peppermint trees [and other trees] with twigs and leaves they collect using their prehensile tails. Western 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 they sometimes nest in house or shed roofs when there are suitable openings for them to get in.

Red Panda and the Polar Bear, the Western Ringtail Possum is listed internationally as a threatened species (IUCN).

The Western Ringtail is recognised as a threatened species under State and Commonwealth legislation. In Western Australia the species is listed as fauna that is rare or likely to become extinct (Specially Protected) under the *Wildlife Conservation Act 1950* and has been assigned the threat status ranking of endangered using International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) criteria. Nationally it is listed as vulnerable under the Commonwealth *Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*.



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

How to live happily with Western Ringtail Possums

The Western Ringtail Possum is an iconic species of the South West. 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.

Western Ringtails 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.

- 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) Western Ringtails 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 your local Shire or landcare group.

Western Ringtail Possums in the roof?

It is illegal to catch or trap Western Ringtails and 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, 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, DPaW 2005/2009, Kemp, C., Bramwell, E.).

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 local Department of Parks and Wildlife office for further advice.

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

Why can't we just translocate Western Ringtail Possums into the bush?

Western Ringtails 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.

For injured or orphaned Western Ringtail Possums

If you find any injured or sick possums or wildlife, 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, will hand them over to a carer for rehabilitation and release.



Dying Peppermint trees in Busselton (Photo: C.Kemp DPaW 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 Western Ringtail's most pressing threat of urbanisation and land clearing, their peppermint tree 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 on possums through further loss of habitat and food.



For more advice contact:

- Fostering Assistance for Wildlife Needing Aid Inc (FAWNA Inc): www.fawna.com.au
- Wildcare Helpline: 9474 9055
- Your local Department of Parks and Wildlife
- Your local Shire
- The Possum Centre Inc: www.possumcentre.com.au

Identifying different species

Western Ringtail Possum



Quenda (Photo: DPaW)



Common Brushtail Possum



Brushtail-Phascogale (Photo: DPaW)



How to spot Western Ringtail Possums

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 shining red-orange eyes and listening out for rustles in the branches and roof-tops.

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
- Keep cats and dogs indoors at night
- 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 Western Ringtails, contact one of the local organisations (see back for details).

For more information contact:

- South West Catchments Council for your local regional group www.swccnm.org.au 9724 2400
- FAVNA Inc www.fawna.com.au
- The Possum Centre Inc www.possumcentre.com.au
- Your local Department of Parks and Wildlife www.dpaw.wa.gov.au
- Your Local Government Authority, WALGA www.walga.asn.au

Acknowledgements:

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

References:

- Department of Parks and Wildlife (DPaW)
- Department of Environment, Water, Heritage & the Arts (DEWHA)
- International Union for Conservation of Nature. Red List of Threatened Species (IUCN)
- Western Australian Local Government Association (WALGA)
- Living with Possums, Kemp, C., Bramwell, E. (DPaW) 2005/2009

Photos Courtesy of: DPaW Busselton, GeoCatch, City of Busselton, Pete Malavisi and Mosman Council.

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