

Sharing the Garden with Possums

Backyards for Wildlife Fact Sheet

Possums in your Backyard

Possums are the only marsupials that have been able to thrive in an urban environment. Originally four types of possum were present in Adelaide. Feather-tail Gliders have become extinct in this area, while Western Pygmy-Possums are occasionally reported in the Adelaide Hills.

However, today two are still typically encountered – the Common Brushtail Possum and the Common Ringtail Possum. It is the tree living habit and adaptability of these two possums that has made this transition possible.

Both “common” species are primarily grey above and white or cream below. The Brushtail is a large (1.5-4.5kg) solitary possum with prominent pointed ears and a bushy black tail. The Ringtail is a slighter (<1Kg) sociable possum, which has small rounded ears with white patches behind them and a thin prehensile tail, the last third of which is white.

Although Brushtail Possums may be frequently encountered on your property, they are now listed as rare in South Australia under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1972*. They have suffered major declines across much of the state and the Adelaide region is one of their few remaining strongholds.



A Brushtail Possum enjoying an exotic treat. Access to such foods has led to high densities of these marsupials in the suburbs often resulting in negative attitudes in regards to their impacts.



Ringtail possums are beautiful animals that spend most of their time in the upper-storey... so plant local Eucalypts if you want to encourage them to your garden.

Habitat Requirements

Possums have most of their food, water and shelter requirements met by their arboreal territories. Brushtails will occasionally venture to the ground to feed, however Ringtails rarely move down from the safety of the trees.

Both species are principally leaf-eaters in the wild, although urban gardens have allowed them to significantly expand their dietary range to include many fruits, vegetables and ornamental shrubs. Brushtail Possums exhibit considerable dietary flexibility which may extend to raiding compost bins, eating insects, bird seed or leftover pet food.

Threats

Habitat clearance and fragmentation is the greatest threat facing these and many other native species. Within highly modified environments such as the suburbs, other threats include lack of natural hollows or “dens”, reduction in movement corridors, introduced predators (dogs, cats and foxes), motor vehicles and electrical transformers atop stobie poles. A number of these situations can bring residents into conflict with possums, particularly Brushtails.

Responsible pet ownership can also help significantly. Ensuring dogs and cats are confined over night (in secure runs or inside) is safer for possums as well as the pets. This will also reduce the level of noise associated with any nocturnal visits.

Artificial Feeding

The availability of food has been one of the principal reasons for possum densities becoming alarmingly high in certain locations. This tends to happen in city parks and gardens where the animals are artificially fed or have access to the organic waste we discard.

Increasing Brushtail numbers greatly exacerbates the conflict between the possums themselves, pets and their human neighbours. Therefore to avoid unnaturally high numbers of possums, supplemental feeding – be it direct or indirect – needs to be limited or eliminated altogether. However, note that wild Ringtail Possums rarely take supplemented food.

Plant Selection

Leaves make up the principal component of the local possums' diet. This is typically augmented with flowers, fruits (and in the case of Brushtails, other sources referred to above). Planting native species preferred by possums is likely to assist by providing a more balanced diet, reducing the impact on other garden plants and increasing their movement corridors.

Eucalypt- species form the backbone of the Australian bush. It is essential they are retained wherever possible in a suburban setting. Local native plants provide important sources of food and shelter for native animals. This is especially true in winter when many introduced species are dormant and when other food may be scarce.

Wildlife Hollows

Brushtail possums are obligate hollow users – so the protection of a 'den' by day is essential. Natural hollows in eucalypts can take hundreds of years to develop and historically a possum would have utilised 4-6 hollows across its territory. Unfortunately resources such as hollows are in short supply across the city. Because of this Brushtails will continue to be a nuisance by invading roofs or sheds, until they move on from the region or their 'hollow' needs are met.



Backyards for Wildlife is managed by the SA Department of Environment and Natural Resources, with support from the Adelaide & Mount Lofty Ranges Natural Resources Management Board and the Australian Government

The smaller Ringtail Possum typically makes its own leaf-nest, or drey, in dense vegetation. This species may also shelter in hollows or roofs, but generally less frequently than Brushtails.

The installation of a wildlife nest box, while unlikely to increase the possum population in your area will reduce the likelihood of one taking up residence in a building.

By supplementing naturally occurring hollows with wildlife boxes, providing native food plants and retaining vegetation corridors you are sustainably supporting these extraordinary suburban neighbours.

Why a Backyard for Wildlife?

In Australia, gardening has been recognised as one of our favourite pastimes and what we do in our home gardens has the potential to benefit or harm the natural environment.

By choosing to develop and maintain a garden that follows the five basic Backyards for Wildlife principles (see below), you can help contribute to a better local environment while at the same time conserve our local flora and fauna, create important habitat, reduce your maintenance costs, and reduce the threat of invasive environmental weeds.

Backyards for Wildlife principles:

1. USE LOCALLY NATIVE PLANTS.
2. USE PLANTS THAT ARE A RANGE OF HEIGHTS.
3. PROVIDE FLOWERS THROUGHOUT THE YEAR.
4. MANAGE YOUR PETS RESPONSIBLY.
5. MINIMISE CHEMICAL USE.

Please consider applying some of these principles to your own backyard, so that together we can all help grow a great living environment for Adelaide.

Find Out More

Visit www.backyards4wildlife.com.au to access more Backyards for Wildlife and biodiversity information including an interactive map with lists of what grew in your suburb prior to 1836, a plant database and contact details for specialist native plant nurseries.

For further Information Contact

Urban Biodiversity Unit, Department of Environment and Natural Resources
Wittunga House, 328 Shepherds Hill Road, Blackwood SA 5051
Telephone: (08) 8278 0600 Facsimile (08) 8278 0619
Web Site: www.backyards4wildlife.com.au

