

Living with possums



NORTH SYDNEY COUNCIL



Acknowledgments:

- Living with Possums, Department of Natural Resources and Environment and the RSPCA, Victoria.
- Triggs, B. Tracks, scats and other traces: A field guide to Australian Mammals. 1996. Oxford University Press, Australia.
- Possums In The Roof. Urban Wildlife Services.
- NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service.
- Taronga Zoo Wildlife Clinic.
- The Australian Museum.

Living with possums

Brushtail and Ringtail possums have adapted well to the urban environment. They are two of the last remaining survivors of the 21 native mammals once present in North Sydney.

They are a reminder of our unique natural heritage and provide an important opportunity for people to witness wildlife firsthand.



Possums are arboreal (tree dwelling) marsupials. The loss of habitat, including land clearance, development, and “tidiness” of gardens and parks are all contributing to a lack of hollows and dense vegetation for shelter and nesting. Tree hollows can take between 100 to 200 years to develop. As a result many possums are forced to take refuge in houses and roofs.

The common Brushtail possum (*Trichosaurus vulpecula*) shown above, is around the size of a domestic cat with grey fur, a black bushy tail, pink nose long whiskers and large ears. They also have sharp claws, which they use to climb trees and comb their fur. Brushtail possums are nocturnal animal, meaning they are active at night and usually spend the day sleeping. They emerge in the evening to feed on eucalypt leaves and flowers, fruits, berries and insects. They are solitary animals with individual territories that are defended vocally and by the use of scent glands. Brushtail possums naturally live in tree hollows.

The Common Ringtail possum (*Pseudocheirus peregrinus*) shown on front cover, is much smaller and shyer than the Brushtail possum. They have short grey fur, large eyes, small rounded ears and a long thin white tail which acts as a fifth limb. They have a defined home range in which they build several nests from twigs and leaves (called dreys) in dense shrubbery. They may share these with other members of their family group. Ringtails emerge at night and forage for leaf shoots, flowers and fruits.


Like any animal, including ourselves, possums may occasionally play host to ticks and fleas. However, they are not carriers of such insects and do not pose any threat in the spreading of ticks, fleas, lice or other diseases.





Possums in your roof

Possums in your roof may be noisy and frustrating, and possibly damaging. If this is a problem, there are measures we can take so both ourselves and our furry neighbours can live successfully together. The most desirable and effective solution to the problem of possums in the roof is to provide the possum with an alternative home in your garden by establishing an artificial nesting box. This approach has the added benefit of establishing a territory around your garden, into which other possums are unlikely to enter and take up residence.



In the past possums have been trapped and relocated away from their site of capture and often into bushland. Recent research has discovered that possums trapped and relocated have a very high incidence of mortality, many will die within a few days. Urban possums released into the unfamiliar surrounds of bushland fall victim to predation by cats, dogs, foxes, and are killed by vehicles when trying to find a new territory or return to their original territory, or die due to stress related trauma. Many cannot find nesting sites and take shelter on the ground, adding to their vulnerability.

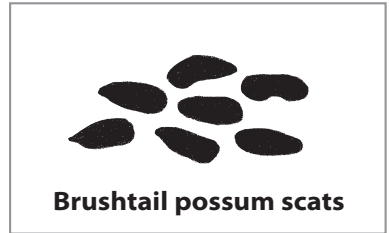
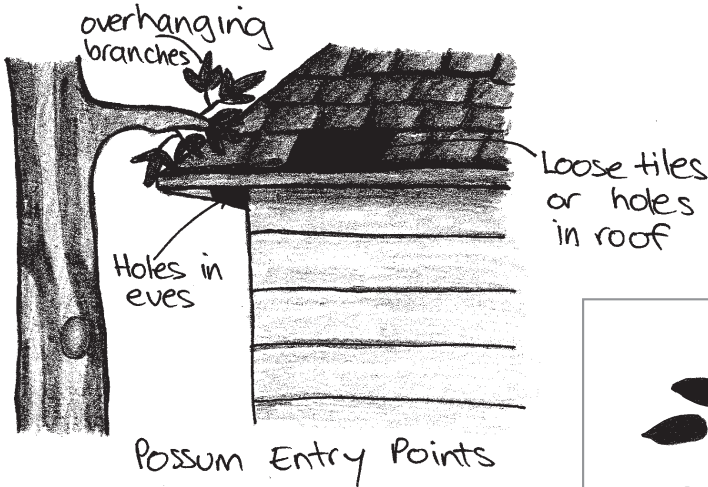
It is NSW Department of Environment & Climate Change policy that possums are not to be relocated nor released a distance greater than 50m from the site of capture.

Removing a possum from your property will only make room for another possum to move in and claim their territory.

The only solution is to get them out of your roof, provide an alternative nest site and make the necessary repairs to keep them from getting back into your roof.

A possum trapped and relocated, will die.

Possoms can gain access to the roof space through loose tiles, loose roofing iron, broken eaves and holes in timber or brickwork.



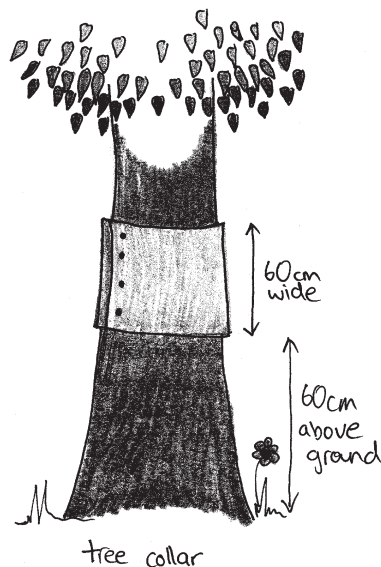
Rats or possums in your roof:

Rats also commonly enter into roof spaces and will make light scampering and gnarling sounds. In comparison, possums have a guttural hiss and make heavy thumping sounds. Brushtail possums make louder noises than Ringtail possums. You can also look for droppings. Rat droppings are narrow, cylindrical with one or both ends pointed. Ringtail possum droppings are rounded at both ends. Brushtail possum droppings are larger than ringtail droppings and are variable in size and colour and are usually deposited in single pellets but may also be grouped in clumps or as strings by hair or plant material.

Make sure to positively identify rats as the cause of your problem if rat bait is to be used. Rat poison will cause internal bleeding in possums and a slow, painful death (the same as in rats).

How to stop possums getting into your roof

- In the early evening, watch for the possum to emerge from your roof, check the roof is clear of possums and block their access points. Do not block holes during the day as the possum will be asleep in the roof.
- Alternately, make a one-way flap to allow possums out but not in. The flap can be made from metal or perspex or wood with a hinge at the top. Cover the flap surrounds in metal to prevent possum claws from gripping.
- Prune all branches that lead to the roof. Leave a gap of at least 1.5m around the roof. (Permission may be required from council, check the NSC Tree Preservation Order).
- Collars made from a sheet of iron 60cm wide and 60cm above the ground can be placed around the trunks of trees giving access to the roof. Fine bird netting can be wrapped around tree trunks (similar to the iron collar). Do not unfold netting from packet, just wrap around. Possums are unable to climb up this. Netting is readily available at most hardware stores.
- Spread 8 blocks of camphor or 1 to 2 boxes of moth balls throughout the roof cavity to repel the possum. Do not use both camphor and moth balls together as they may chemically react.
- Place a light in the roof cavity for 3 days and nights. The light and smell of the camphor should drive the possum from your roof.
- If these measures are not successful in deterring possums from your roof, you may need to trap them. A free licence is required from the NSW Dept of Environment & Climate Change prior to trapping a possum. For these licences and more information, please contact the Wildlife Licensing and Management Unit on **(02) 9585 6406** or email wildlife.licensing@environment.nsw.gov.au
- Install a nest box. As possums are territorial if the box is adopted it is likely to keep others away from your roof.



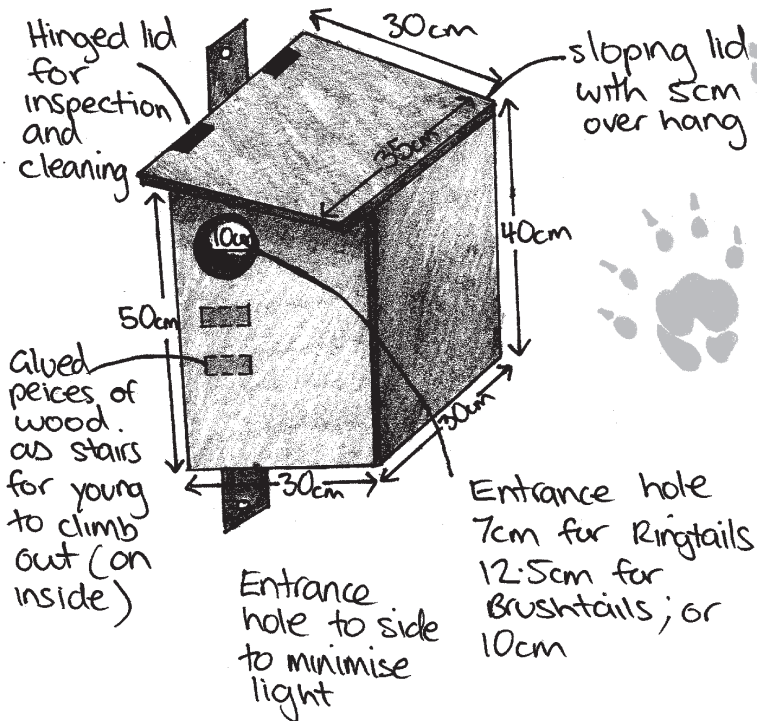
Nest boxes

Nest boxes are commercially available and can also easily be constructed at home. (For easy instructions visit: <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/animals/GuideToMakingAPossumHouse.htm>) The boxes are also available for sale at cost price from Council Chambers. Nest boxes can be made from second-hand or new timber.

Do not use treated timber, toxic paints, chipboard or smelly glues. The timber should be 19-25mm thick for insulation.

A few small holes should be drilled on the base of the box to allow for drainage. Hollow logs can also be used for possums by blocking one end, bearing in mind that logs on the ground provide habitat for lizards, insects and other reptiles.

A hinged roof will allow easy removal of feral animals that may invade the box and a potential escape access for the possum from predatory attack.



Remove any feral animals such as Indian Mynas or Exotic Honey Bees that may invade the box.

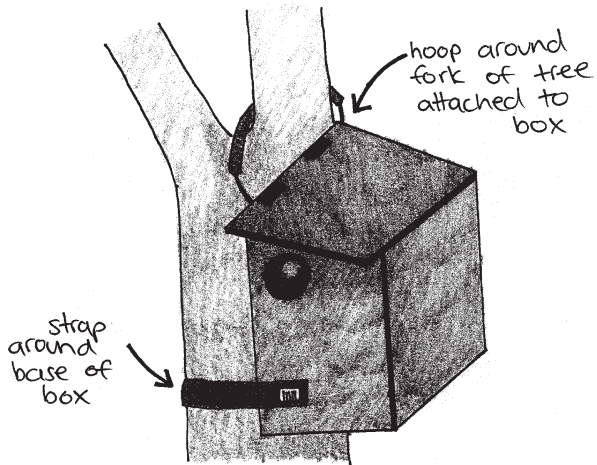
The nest box should be attached at least 4m in height up a tree. The box can be attached using galvanised nails. Alternatively, an un-intrusive method that also allows for loosening the box as the tree grows is to secure the nest box using a wire loop covered in a length of garden hose and placed around a fork in the tree.

The entrance needs to be positioned away from direct sunlight, so the possum does not get too hot, and positioned away from prevailing winds. Banana can be smeared up the tree and fruit such as apple left on top of the box to help attract the possum into the box.

If there is not a suitable tree in the garden, possum boxes can be screwed on to two planks of wood and placed on a flat surface of the roof or awning. A wooden box or possum box can also be inserted into the hole in the roof, so the hole acts as the entrance to the nesting box and the box prohibits the possum from gaining access into the roof.

Nest boxes should preferably be placed in a tree with branches that interlock with other trees to reduce the need for possums to walk along the ground where they are susceptible to attack by cats, dogs and foxes, or impact with motor vehicles. Aerial pathways can also be constructed using thick rope.

While you're waiting for the box to be occupied, please resist the temptation to keep looking inside. You don't know if the possum is checking the box out when you're not looking, and constant disturbance can discourage



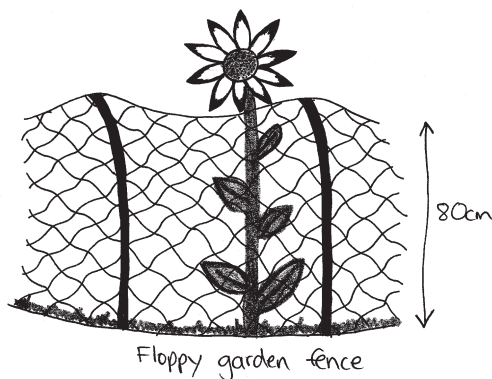
them from occupying it. You'll know when the locals move in by watching, listening, and by looking for droppings underneath.

Also, do not be alarmed if 'the wrong animal' moves into the nest box. If an Eastern Rosella moves into the box you so carefully made for a Ringtail Possum... So be it! Suitable habitat for all hollow-nesting native wildlife is limited in urban areas, so every little bit extra that we provide will be of lasting benefit to these beautiful animals.

Possums and your garden

If possums are damaging fruit trees and ornamental plants in your garden:

- Build a floppy fence around your garden using 80cm wide heavy galvanised chicken wire. Bend the upper part to curve outwards, so the fence will bend over and spring backwards if a possum (or cat) tries to climb over.
- Place bird netting over fruit tree foliage. Keep netting taught as bats can get caught and trapped in loose netting.
- Use tree collars of iron or fine bird netting.
- Plant locally native plants as an alternative food source.



Possums like:

- *Acacia longifolia* (wattle)
- *Acacia linifolia*
- *Acacia terminalis*
- *Acacia floribunda*
- *Acacia implexa*
- *Acacia parramattensis*
- *Angohipora costata* (Sydney red gum)
- *Eucalypts*
- *Melaleucas* (paperbark)
- *Melaleuca armillaris*
- *Callicoma serratifolia* (black wattle)
- NSW Christmas bush
- *Banksias*
- *Callistemon linearis* (bottle brush)
- *Callistemon citrinus*
- *Leptospermums* (tea - tree)

For further information contact Council for a list of Wildlife Habitat Plants of North Sydney and a Native Plant List for your local area.

Trapping possums

Possums are protected fauna in NSW. Trapping possums without a licence is illegal.

A licence must be obtained to trap possums on your property. A licence can be obtained free of charge from any office of the NSW National Parks and Wildlife Service or by calling the Dept of Environment & Climate Change on (02) 9585 6406.

Possums must be released within 50m from site of capture. Trapped possums must be kept in a warm, quiet and dark place by covering the trap with a towel or other cloth and released at sunset on the day of capture. Releasing possums during the day increases stress, trauma and disorientation and makes them an easy target for predatory attack, harassment from birds and impact with vehicles.

A possums' vision is impaired during the day. Shelter is difficult to find and possums end up in very precarious locations.

Trapping is highly stressful for these animals, although they may not appear to be stressed.

Licensed wildlife controllers offer a service that includes trapping possums, roof repair and erecting a nest box. Note that possums will be released on the same property. (Contact Council for details on licensed wildlife controllers)

For further information contact North Sydney Council on 02 9936 8100.

Please help look after our native wildlife that share the urban environment with us. Please plant locally native plants and install a nest box.





North Sydney Council
Open Space and
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www.northsydney.nsw.gov.au

**For assistance with any sick,
injured or distressed wildlife.**

Contact

• **wires**

(Wildlife Information and Rescue Service)

Phone: (02) 8977 3333

• **Sydney Metropolitan Wildlife Service**

Phone: (02) 9413 4300

• **Taronga Zoo Wildlife Clinic**

Phone: (02) 9969 2777