

# Sharing the garden with possums



Possums are the only marsupials that have been able to thrive in an urban environment. By supplementing naturally occurring hollows with wildlife boxes, providing local native food plants and retaining patches of remnant vegetation you are sustainably supporting these extraordinary suburban neighbours.

## Adelaide's possum species

Originally four types of possum were present in Adelaide. Feathertail Gliders (*Acrobates pygmaeus*) have become locally extinct, while Western Pygmy-possums (*Cercartetus concinnus*) are infrequently reported in the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges.

However, today two are still typically encountered in urban areas – the Common Brushtail Possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) and the smaller Common Ringtail Possum (*Pseudocheirus peregrinus*). 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 Possum is a large (1.5-4.5 kg) solitary possum with prominent pointed ears and a bushy black tail. The Ringtail Possum is a slighter (<1 kg) sociable possum, which has small rounded ears with white patches behind them and a thin prehensile tail with a white tip.

Although brushtail possums may be frequently encountered in some urban areas, they are threatened in South Australia under the *National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972*. The species has suffered major declines across much of the state and the Adelaide and Mount Lofty Ranges region is one of their few remaining strongholds in SA.

## Threats

Habitat clearance and the long-term effects of fragmentation is the greatest threat facing these and many other native species. Within highly modified environments such as the suburbs, other threats include introduced predators (dogs, cats and foxes), motor vehicles, electrical transformers atop stobie poles and a lack of natural hollows or "dens". A number of these situations can bring residents into conflict with possums, particularly the brushtails. Responsible pet ownership can help to reduce conflict with possums.

Ensuring dogs and cats are confined overnight (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.



Common 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. Common Brushtail Possums exhibit considerable dietary flexibility which may extend to raiding compost bins, eating insects, bird seed or leftover pet food.

## 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 four to six hollows across its territory.

Unfortunately resources such as hollows are in short supply across parts of the city and other metropolitan areas. Because of this brushtails can be a nuisance by residing in roofs or sheds, until they move on or their 'hollow' needs are met. Ensuring external access to your roof or sheds is restricted will dramatically reduce the likelihood of a possum moving in.

The smaller ringtail typically makes its own leaf-nest, or drey, in dense vegetation. It may also shelter in hollows or roofs, but generally less frequently than brushtails.



The installation of a wildlife nest box is unlikely to increase the possum population in your area but may reduce the likelihood of one taking up residence in a building. See the nest box factsheet on our website for more information.

## 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.

## Artificial feeding

The availability of food is one of the principal reasons for possum densities becoming higher in some urban 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.

Artificially high brushtail numbers can exacerbate conflict between the possums themselves, with pets and their human neighbours. Therefore to avoid high numbers of possums, supplemental feeding – be it direct or indirect – needs to be limited or eliminated altogether. Note that wild Ringtail Possums rarely take supplemented food.

## Why a backyard for wildlife?

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

By developing and maintaining a garden that follows the five basic Backyards 4 Wildlife principles you will contribute to a better local environment, help conserve our local flora and fauna, create important habitat, reduce your maintenance costs, and reduce the threat of invasive environmental weeds.

## Top 5 tips

1. Use plants native to your suburb.
2. Plant species that are a range of heights.
3. Use mix of local native plants that flower 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 help grow a great living environment for Adelaide.



Common Brushtail Possums should not be fed. Access to such foods had led to high densities of these marsupials in the suburbs, often resulting in negative attitudes in regards to their impacts.

## More information

Australian Mammal Society  
<https://australianmammals.org.au/>

Visit the urban biodiversity page of our website to access more Backyards 4 Wildlife information and contact details for specialist native plant nurseries.

[www.naturalresources.sa.gov.au/adelaidemtloftyranges](http://www.naturalresources.sa.gov.au/adelaidemtloftyranges)

Or contact your nearest Natural Resources Centre

**Black Hill**  
 115 Maryvale Road, Athelstone, SA 5076  
 P (08) 8336 0901

**Eastwood**  
 205 Greenhill Road, Eastwood, SA 5063  
 P (08) 8273 9100

**Gawler**  
 8 Adelaide Road, Gawler South, SA 5118  
 P (08) 8523 7700

**Willunga**  
 5 Aldinga Road, Willunga, SA 5172  
 P (08) 8550 3400

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