Living with Possums in South Australia

With a reduction in natural habitats due to urbanisation, native animals are often forced to live in close quarters with humans. The opportunity to observe native wildlife in your own backyard cannot be overstated; however, living with wildlife has its share of problems too.

This information aims to help solve problems that possums may be causing to your property. You will find a list of common questions and solutions to possum problems. If you still have questions or your problem is not covered please contact you local Department for Environment and Heritage office.

What types of possums are found in South Australia?

There are 5 possum species in South Australia:

- Common Brushtail Possum
- Common Ringtail Possum
- Western Pygmy-possum
- Little Pygmy-possum
- Eastern Pygmy-possum

The species most commonly encountered in natural and urban environments are the Common Brushtail Possum and Common Ringtail Possum.

This information relates specifically to the Common Brushtail Possum and Common Ringtail Possum.

Possums

Possums are nocturnal animals. Finding shelter and nesting sites is becoming the biggest challenge for these native animals. With the removal of many large old gum trees, possums have to seek shelter in other areas. For Common Brushtail Possums one common alternative is buildings with access to the roof space.

Common Brushtail Possum

Common Brushtail Possum are approximately the size of a domestic cat. Males are generally larger than females. These possums have dense fur, which varies in colour from light to dark grey on the back and a creamy coloured belly. The distinguishing features of the Common Brushtail Possum are the black bushy tail and the long ears (50-60mm).
The Common Brushtail Possum has a major autumn and minor spring breeding season. A single young is born following 16-18 days gestation and spends 4-5 months in the mother's well-developed pouch, attached to one or two teats. A further 1-2 months is spent suckling and riding on the mother's back before weaning is completed. The young possum stays with its mother for the next 6-18 months then moves to find its own home.

Breeding season and territorial battles are when the Common Brushtail Possums are most vocal, hissing and fighting with each other.

The Common Brushtail Possum is found open eucalypt forest and woodland areas and uses hollow dead tree branches and tree trunks for refuge. In urban areas this species will also use the roof space of a building for shelter.

**Common Ringtail Possum**

The Common Ringtail Possum is a shy animal that has adapted its behaviour to live in urban environments with humans and their gardens, making use of ornamental native plants and introduced fruits and flowers.

A smaller animal in size, the fur on the Common Ringtail Possum is not dense but light to dark grey with a creamy coloured belly. It has a softer looking face with rounder ears that have a white patch behind each ear. It has a tapering white tail, which is not bushy like the Common Brushtail Possum.

The Common Ringtail Possum is nocturnal and is most active foraging and grooming during the first part of the night.

The Common Ringtail Possum can have one to three young born during autumn to winter, with survival rates of the young being quite low. Young animals remain in the nest or are carried on the mother's back while she searches for food. Family groups tend to stay together until the young disperse.

The Common Ringtail Possum is found in a variety of habitats where trees and shrubs have dense foliage. This species builds a nest, or drey, in amongst the dense foliage of trees or shrubs and several metres above the ground. These spherical shaped nests are lined with grass, shredded bark or leaves. Common Ringtail Possums rarely enter a building roof.

**Conservation status of Common Brushtail and Common Ringtail Possums in South Australia**

The Department for Environment and Heritage has identified that the Common Brushtail Possum has suffered a significant decline in abundance and reduction in its range across South Australia and suspects that these trends are continuing.

Although Common Brushtail Possum populations appear to be secure within the Greater Adelaide Region, Mount Lofty Ranges and Kangaroo Island, the Department for Environment and Heritage has reviewed the status of these species and recommended that the Common Brushtail Possum be listed as rare on the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972 Threatened Species Schedules in 2004.

The Common Ringtail Possum remains common across its range.

**Possums and the law**

**Are possums protected?**

In South Australia, all possums are protected (i.e. safeguarded against collecting, hunting or other activities) under the provisions of the National Parks and Wildlife Act, 1972.

**I have a possum on my property. What can I do?**

If the possum is not causing a problem then there is no need to act. Enjoy the opportunity to observe native wildlife on your property but remember possums are wild animals.

If the possum is causing a problem, assess the nature and extent of the problem before deciding whether there is any need to take action. You have a moral responsibility to deal with a possum problem in a humane and just manner. Managing the problem will involve a time commitment, often some monetary cost and altered practices. Combining a range of deterrents simultaneously should reduce or eliminate the impacts.
Destruction of animals is unlikely to solve your problem, is very time consuming and will only provide short-term relief. Look for longer-term solutions to control damage, rather than killing the possums.

I have a possum in my roof space, what can I do?
Determine whether it is actually a possum in your roof. Although an unpleasant thought, rats and mice are very common around urban areas and maybe they are living in your roof space. Bats roost in ceilings or wall cavities, create noises, smell and leave small droppings inside buildings and Welcome Swallows typically roost and nest in sheltered sites such as under roof eaves.

Things to look for:
If you can access your roof space look for droppings, evidence of possum nests or possums asleep in your roof.

The noise made from a possum moving about in a roof space is quite different to noise made by rats. As possums are nocturnal they generally move around at night. They have a heavy thumping movement across a roof or ceiling (described by some as sounding like an elephant walking on the roof!). Possums also cough and make hissing noises. Rats make a pitter patter sound on the roof or ceiling when moving about.

There are several options available to you to manage your possum problem and are in keeping with their protected status.

Option.1 (NO PERMIT REQUIRED)
Provide an alternative home for the possum.
Determine a suitable sheltered position on your property to erect a possum box.
Purchase or construct a box designed specifically for possums.
Place the possum box at least four metres from the ground to protect the possum from domestic pets and feral foxes.
Possum boxes should be monitored to ensure they are not used by other feral animals such as starlings, house sparrows, bees and European wasps. This option will be most successful if combined with options 2 or 3.

Option.2 (NO PERMIT REQUIRED)
Prevent access into the roof space by blocking off access points.
Determine how possums are gaining access into the roof space. This is best achieved by:
- observing possum movement from your roof space after dark when the possums leave nest sites to forage for food,
  or
- inspecting the roof and eaves carefully for signs of scratching, urine/scent staining or dislodged possum hairs where the possum enters the roof space.
Wait until the possum leaves the roof and then use timber or chicken mesh to block off access points before the possum returns.
Discourage re-invasion by destroying the possums scent markings at all entry points by applying household bleach to the affected areas.
The possum will be forced to find alternative shelter within its territory, possibly taking up refuge in a possum box installed on your property.
It is recommended that building repairs be carried out as a priority action because most often there are several possums in an area inhabiting your roof space. Your roof space may also be a home for rats, starlings and house sparrows, which will create similar problems.

Option.3 (NO PERMIT REQUIRED)
Install a one-way flap at the possum's access point to the roof space.
Install a one-way flap to allow possums to leave the roof space but not return.
This flap can be made from metal or perspex, with a hinged top. It is recommended that the flap be surrounded with metal to prevent possums from getting back in by pulling the door open with their claws.

Option 4 (PERMIT REQUIRED)

Place a possum trap in the roof space to capture and remove the possum.

Contact your local council or equipment hire company to hire a possum trap.

Obtain a permit to trap and release possums from your local Department for Environment and Heritage office.

Position the trap inside the roof space near the possum’s access point. Ensure the trap is secure and stable to avoid potential injury to the possum. This needs to be done on the day you will possum proof your house, especially if the possum is still in your roof at the time of proofing.

Set the trap at dusk and check each morning. Close the trap each morning to make sure possums are not caught in the trap in the heat of the day. Reset the trap at dusk.

NOTE: trapping and releasing possums without possum proofing your building will not solve the problem.

Strictly follow codes of practice below for trapping to ensure possums are not injured.

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**Trapping possums**

**What type of trap can I use to trap a possum?**

The recommended possum trap is a wire mesh box trap with mesh less than 19mm square. A trap with larger mesh can cause injury to possums.

The trap should have a spiral bait holder or foot treadle with a spring-activated door. Traps with bait hooks can cause serious injury to possums contained within the trap.

*Recommended possum trap*

![Image: Courtesy of Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria](image)

**Where can I get a possum trap?**

Please remember, you must obtain a Permit to Trap and Release from the Department for Environment and Heritage before you trap the possum.

Your local council may loan or hire possum traps. You may be asked to show your permit to the Council officer before you can take the trap. Please note there may be a waiting period of 2-3 weeks to obtain use of a trap.

Also, check the Yellow Pages under pest control, traps or equipment hire.

**What happens to the possum after it’s caught?**

Keep the possum in the trap and release at sunset on the day of capture, on the same property, within 50 metres of the capture site. Possums must be released within 24 hours of capture.

The trap must be covered with a breathable cloth, such as a hessian bag, and kept in a quiet place until sunset. It should also be protected from domestic pets, other wildlife and weather.

Do not release possums during the day because it increases their stress and puts them at risk of being attacked and injured by domestic pets or feral predators.
Possums are wild animals and may look scared or frightened in the trap. Keep children away and do not be tempted to place your hand inside the cage as they will defend themselves.

**Can I destroy a Brushtail Possum myself?**

Possums can be destroyed only if a destruction permit has been issued by the Department for Environment and Heritage.

The only acceptable means of killing possums in the greater Adelaide metropolitan area and the Mount Lofty Ranges is by the use of carbon dioxide or by barbiturate overdose, which can be administered only by a registered operator.

The humane destruction of Brushtail Possums can be facilitated by:

- registered veterinarians,
- the Animal Welfare League, and
- animal research facilities that hold a current scientific permit and animal ethics approval (contact the Department for Environment and Heritage Research Permits Section on telephone 8124 4725 for details).

Pest controllers are not issued with a permit to trap and destroy (destruction permit). However, pest controllers can arrange for the destruction of possums on behalf of a landholder only in situations where the landholder has obtained a trap and destroy (destruction) permit from the Department for Environment and Heritage.

Please note that a permit to trap and destroy possums will be granted only if the applicant has tried all other means of resolving the conflict situation.

**What should I do if I accidentally trap a Ringtail Possum instead of a Brushtail Possum?**

Keep the possum in the trap and release at sunset on the day of capture, on the same property, within 50 metres of the capture site. Possums must be released within 24 hours of capture.

Only under extenuating circumstances will the Department for Environment and Heritage issue a permit to destroy Common Ringtail Possums.

**I have a wild possum in my roof. When will the Department for Environment and Heritage come and collect it?**

The Department for Environment and Heritage does not provide this service. This information is aimed at assisting landholders to manage impacts and live in harmony with wildlife.

Possums are part of the urban environment. Houses have replaced some of the natural habitats that have been lost through urban development. If maintenance issues are not addressed possums are likely to return. Having a possum in your roof may mean that there are building maintenance issues requiring your attention. Removing the possum from its territory will not address your building maintenance issues.

Simple steps can be taken to reduce possum problems:

1. Prevent access into the roof space by blocking off access points or install one-way flap at the possum’s access point to the roof space
2. Provide an alternative home for the possum.
3. Place a possum trap in the roof space to capture the possum then release it on your property after addressing the building maintenance issues. A permit from the Department for Environment and Heritage is required in this instance.

**Pest controllers**

Are pest controllers licensed? If so, by who?

Pest controllers providing a possum removal service require a permit from the Department for Environment and Heritage. This permit grants approval for a pest controller to trap and release possums on behalf of the landholder onto the landholder’s property within 50 metres of the capture site.
Pest controllers can arrange for the destruction of possums on behalf of the landholder only in situations where the landholder has obtained a trap and destroy (destruction) permit from the Department for Environment and Heritage.

**How do I know if a pest controller has a possum permit?**

Not all pest controllers hold a permit to trap and release possums. Ask the pest controller to show you a copy of their permit or ask for their permit number. Should you wish to verify their permit please contact the Department for Environment and Heritage Fauna Permit Unit on telephone 8124 4930 and quote the pest controller's permit number.

**Should pest controllers, who “possum proof” buildings, hold any other licenses?**

Pest controllers who provide a possum proofing service that involves altering, repairing or improving a building or house, must hold a Specified (Restricted) Builders License pursuant to the Building Work Contractors Act 1995. The Office of Business and Consumer Affairs administers this Act.

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**Excluding possums**

**How can I exclude possums from my house?**

**Ensure that all possible entry points are blocked off**

Possums can gain entry through loose roof tiles and holes the size of a tennis ball in timber or bricks.

Observe possum movement from your roof space after dark. This is the time that the possum will leave the roof space to forage for food.

Ensure that you have blocked off all entry points after the possum has vacated the roof space.

If the possum is accessing your property via electricity or telephone wires that run from the street to your house then attach a large disc (approximately 80cm in diameter) to the fascia board encircling the point where the wires enter the house/building.

**Trim any branches that overhang the house**

Trimming overhanging branches and branches leading to your roof is likely to prevent possum access.

**Provide an alternative home for the possum**

Install a possum box in a suitable sheltered position, at least 4 metres from the ground, to protect possums from domestic pets.
**Place sheet metal collars on tree trunks**
Place sheet metal collars, 60cm wide and 60cm above the ground, on tree trunks of trees that provide possum access to your roof and to protect fruit trees.

**Spread quassia chips in the roof space**
Quassia chips may repel possums from your roof space. These can be purchased at hardware stores.

**Use blocks of camphor or mothballs in the roof space**
Blocks of camphor or mothballs in the roof space may repel possums from your roof space.

**DO NOT** use camphor and mothballs at the same time as they react chemically with each other.

**Possum nest boxes**

I’m interested in installing a possum nest box in my backyard. Where can I obtain one?

Nest boxes can be obtained from the following or look in the yellow pages.
- veterinarians specialising in the care of native wildlife
- local councils
- pest controllers
You can also build your own possum box. Refer to the following sites for more information.

Native Animal Network Association
http://www.nana.asn.au/

Gould League
http://www.gould.edu.au/

**Relocating possums**

I have always taken possums away and released them in the Adelaide Hills or in a National Park. What is wrong with that?

Releasing possums away from the capture site is illegal. Possums are highly territorial so relocating possums elsewhere will only result in the released animal being attacked by possums already in the area. This method is considered inhumane, as it is very stressful for the animal and will result in the death of the possum regardless of where you release them. It may also spread disease if the animal is sick.

I have always taken possums away and they always come back. Why?

It is highly unlikely that the possum you relocated has returned. The possum you relocated will have died under very stressful circumstances.

Possums are part of the natural and urban environment and are territorial. Relocating a possum will not solve your problem. It simply means that a possum territory (which includes your property with highly sought after nest and food sites) will be vacant for only a short period of time before another possum arrives.

**Possums and gardens**

**Possums are destroying my garden - can I trap them?**

Possums should only be trapped if they are living in buildings. Try to resolve the problem by protecting the plants or planting more attractive plants to minimise impacts.

**Possums are damaging my garden and eating fruit from my trees. What can I do to stop them?**

There are simple steps that can be taken to reduce possum damage to your garden:
1. Build a floppy fence around your ornamental or vegetable garden. Use 80cm wide, heavily galvanised chicken wire, bury the bottom 20cm and support the remainder on vertical lengths of flexible, high-tensile fencing wire. Bend the wire to curve the upper section outwards. When the possum attempts to climb the fence it will bend over and then spring back.

Place sheet metal collars, 60cm wide and 60cm above the ground, on tree trunks of fruit trees.

Illustration courtesy of Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria
The effectiveness of possum repellents is variable. These could be used in conjunction with other recommended deterrent measures listed above.

What can I do to stop possums destroying my garden?
Is it really a problem? Are possums eating all the fruit, roses, etc? Remember possums are trying to survive in urban environments with fewer natural areas and food sources.

Possum deterrents for the garden
- Plant some trees that will supply the possums with an alternative food source. This may encourage possums to keep away from the more precious plants in your garden or at least reduce the impacts they may be causing.
- Spray the plant with a bitter product, such as quassia chips, minced garlic or chilli flakes, that have been boiled and made into a liquid spray.
- Camphor or naphthalene flakes spread around the garden. These products have a bitter taste.
- Trim back tree branches from fences so they do not have a clear runway. Possums will jump, but not huge distances.
- Remove all fallen fruit. Removing this food source forces the possum to find food elsewhere.
- Do not feed possums. Remember, possums are wild animals and the best food for them is natural food they find themselves.

Other possum problems
What should I do if I find an injured possum?
Injured possums should be taken to a registered vet or to a wildlife carer/rescue organisation.

Your nearest wildlife carer/rescue organisations can be found in the Yellow Pages listed under Animal Welfare Organisations.

My dog is barking at possums and it’s annoying the neighbours. What can I do?
A permit will not be issued because your dog is barking at a possum.

1. Have you considered whether your dog is barking at something other than a possum? Dogs bark for numerous reasons.
2. Have you just moved into the neighbourhood? This can be very unsettling for some dogs.
3. Do you leave pet food out overnight, which possums may be feeding on? Remember, possums are trying to survive in urban environments with fewer natural areas and food sources. Remove pet food at night that has not been eaten, for your sake and the possum.
4. Is your dog barking at the neighbours? Loud music or activity on your neighbour’s property can unsettle dogs.
5. Are the neighbours cats roaming about your property? Talk with your neighbour if this is a problem. To protect native wildlife from cat predation, it is recommended that cats remain indoors at night.
6. Is your dog barking to gain your attention?

Your local council, who administer and enforce the provisions of the Dog and Cat Management Act 1995, may have suggestions to assist with stopping your dog from barking.

If possum numbers are declining why can't I release the possum down the road or in a park or reserve?
Yes, the Common Brushtail Possum has suffered a significant reduction in its range across South Australia particularly in regional mainland South Australia. Unfortunately, the solution is not as simple as releasing a trapped possum down the road, or into a park or reserve. Possums are territorial and studies have found that possums released into another possum’s territory usually die within a few days due to stress, fighting and starvation. It is not humane to release possums this way. Relocating possums may also spread disease if the animal is sick.

Possums have declined in regional areas due to fox predation, habitat fragmentation through urbanisation and other land management practices and the loss of suitable refuge sites and natural food sources. Relocating possums to these regional areas is impractical, as they would not survive. Australia has lost many of its native animals through habitat destruction and disease. Please help protect what remaining species we do have left.
I have possums in my yard and they are urinating and leaving droppings, which smells and I continually have to clean up. What can I do?

- If the possum droppings are found beneath electricity or telephone wires that run from the street to your house then perhaps this is how the possum is accessing your property. Block the possum’s access point by attaching a large disc (approximately 80cm in diameter) to the fascia board encircling the point where the wires enter the house/building.
- If the possum droppings are found beneath a tree that overhangs your paved areas, for example, trim back the tree branches or prevent access to the tree.
- Locate and destroy all scent markings by applying a household bleach to the affected areas.
- Find out what is attracting the possum to your backyard. Perhaps there is a ready food supply (e.g. dog food, fruit trees, vegetable or ornamental garden, compost bin, bird seed left on a bird feeding tray)).
- It is also worthwhile checking to see if these problems are being caused by rats (droppings) or cats (spraying).

Common Brushtail Possums produce cylindrical pellets (droppings) that vary in size and colour due to their wide variety of diet. The pellets are usually found as a group of individual pellets or may be grouped in clumps or as strings (from hair or plant material ingested).

Common Ringtail Possums also produce cylindrical pellets that are generally smaller than those of the Common Brushtail Possum. The pellets are usually found in groups of 3-6, have a granulated surface and both ends are usually rounded. Pellet colour varies with diet.

Rats produce narrow cylindrical pellets with one or both ends pointed. Pellet colour varies with diet but is commonly dark brown or black.

Who can I contact?
If you require further information in managing and living in harmony with possums please contact your nearest Department for Environment and Heritage office.

Further reading