

## **Common Brushtail Possum - *Trichosurus vulpecula***

Brushtail possums have the widest distribution of any Australian native marsupial. They are found from W.A to the east coast excepting in really arid areas and from Tasmania to Cape York. Although widely distributed, their population numbers have diminished in many areas and disappeared completely from others, due to greater human occupation and predation by feral animals such as foxes and cats. Because of the wide distribution they are in no danger of extinction on a national scale.

The common brushtail possum is well known to locals on Magnetic Island as there is a high population density, at least in the lowland bay areas where people live. They are nocturnal - becoming active at dusk. In the more remote national park areas their density may be much lower as there are less fruit bearing trees.

On mainland areas possums tend to have arboreal dens, sleeping during the day in trees. On Magnetic Island, however, most possums seem to prefer the abundant rock crevices as dens, although much of their foraging time at night will be in trees.

### **Identification:**

Well furred, both colour types are present on Magnetic Island, gingery brown and steel to dark grey and it is not uncommon to see, for example, a grey mother with a brown baby on its back. Tail colour black with black facial markings and large ears. Length of the body in adults approximately 400 mm and tail length approximately 340mm. Males are heavier than females and well muscled with obvious testicular bulge below tail. Noises may range from throaty growls to hisses when mating or annoyed.

### **Life Cycle**

Possums live to an average of six-seven years. Females mature between one and three years with most starting to reproduce at around two years old. Males are sexually mature at three years and do not have as great a survival rate on the island as females. Magnetic Island possums can have two young per year but the usual is one, born from April -May . Some may breed again in spring. Like all marsupials babies are born tiny with eyes closed and no hair and make their way to the pouch where they attach to a teat and remain so for quite some time. Mothers will keep their babies hidden in the pouch when people are around but babies start to spend longer and longer on the backs of their mothers until they become too large. By this time they have been sharing solid food with the mother for some time and eventually do not return to the pouch. They tend to hop on and off mothers back, gradually becoming more adventurous. Some mothers seem to conceal their babies rather than carrying them, taking food back to their hiding place or den. There comes a time where the babies will spend less and less time with their mothers and more and more

time searching for food alone. These semi-independent juveniles are about 3/4 the size of an adult. In a good year when food is plentiful on the island and the 'best' areas tend to become more populated, mothers will most likely start producing more male babies as males will leave their mother's territory when they are old enough whilst females tend to stay close. Possums will fight or squabble with each other, over food etc and the males over mates.

### **Predators:**

Potential predators on the island could include quolls, owls, eagles, cats and dogs and cars. Visitors to the island are cautioned to drive carefully, especially at night, as many of the islands creatures, including possums, are nocturnal and can be found crossing roads.

### **Other dangers**

There has been in recent years here, outbreaks of Golden Staph in possums, which can become potentially fatal if it reaches the nervous system. It will attack wounds from squabbling and bare patches will appear in the fur with red weepy centres. In a strong healthy animal on a natural diet it will disappear on its own eventually. One of the causes can be bad food especially bread and bread products. It is really important not to feed any native animals bread as it weakens their natural resistance. Older breeding females can succumb to staph infections more readily, usually from stress or a combination of stress and too much 'human type' food. In the dry season especially possums will eat anything they can find. Unwanted food in picnic areas should be placed in secure bins or taken home and disposed of there. All bins should be securely lidded. If a possum gets into the council wheelie bins, it cannot get out if the bin is fairly empty and can eventually die a terrible death from dehydration if not found. Bins that have been left open should be checked before closing and if possums are trapped it is simply a case of tipping the bin gently over and the possum will generally bolt out of it. If doors are open at night a possum will come inside looking for food. If a possum comes inside or is trapped anywhere do not attempt to handle it as it will scratch and bite hard. Shooing it gently with a broom etc will do far less damage to you and the creature.

### **Diet, Feeding and Visitors**

Their natural diet can range through fruit, nectar and blossoms, leaves and seeds and will depend on what is in season. As with all wild animals it is better not to feed them, although many locals provide water for birds and animals to drink as the island has very dry periods. If you must feed them the best food is the wild bird mix available at most shops on the island. It is also best not to feed them every day or on any kind of regular schedule as many animals come to depend on the food rather than searching for their natural food. Please, never feed them bread or junk food as it can kill them.

Possoms don't mind humans and can get used to them. If you remain still, with no sudden movements, you may be able to observe the creatures for some time. They don't seem to mind people talking as long as they aren't moving. They are fun to watch especially if there are babies. As with all wild creatures it is better not to approach. They have sharp claws and teeth and will fight their way out if cornered and frightened. Some Magnetic Island possums, if used to humans, have a particular 'toe biting' behaviour. If a possum approaches your bare, sandled or thonged feet it is best to back off as they may gently or not so gently bite the big toe. It is a behaviour associated with begging and it is best not to encouraged as they may break the skin. There are many noises at night around the bay areas of Magnetic Island and possums create quite a lot of them. If you hear something on the roof it will probably be a possum. You may also hear them squabbling.

### References

Issac, J.L., 2005, Life History and demographics of an island possum, Aust. Journal of Zoology, 53: 195-203  
Van Dyck, S.,2000, Other Mammals in 'Wildlife of Tropical Far North Queensland', Editors Ryan, M. and Burwell, C., Queensland Museum Publication. 329-350.

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