

Possums in your Roof

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.

The species most commonly encountered in natural and urban environments are the Common Brushtail Possum and Common Ringtail Possum. This information aims to help solve problems that possums may be causing to your property and relates specifically to the Common Brushtail Possum.

Common Brushtail Possum

Common Brushtail Possums are approximately the size of a domestic cat. Males are generally larger than females.



Common Brushtail Possum (Photo: Scott Jennings, DEH)

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 is found in 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.

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.

Conservation status of Common Brushtail 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 this species. The Common Brushtail Possum is now listed as a rare species on *the National Parks and Wildlife Act 1972* Threatened Species Schedules as of 21 February 2008.

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 legal responsibility to deal with a possum problem in a humane 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 a very time consuming process and will only provide short-term relief. Look for longer-term solutions to control impacts, 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. 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 noise, 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 during daylight hours by inspecting the roof and eaves carefully for gaps, signs of scratching, urine/scent staining or dislodged possum hairs where the possum enters the roof space.
- waiting until the possum leaves the roof and then use timber or chicken mesh to block off access points before the possum returns.
- discouraging 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 door flap at the possum's access point to the roof space.

Install a one-way door flap to allow possums to leave the roof space but not return. For further information please contact a licensed pest controller.

Option.4 (PERMIT REQUIRED)

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

Obtain a permit to trap and release possums from your local Department for Environment and Heritage office, then contact your local council or equipment hire company to hire a possum trap.

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.

Possums are nocturnal animals. 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.

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.

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 will 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 covered with a breathable cloth, such as a hessian bag, and kept in a quiet place until sunset. 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. 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?

No. Possums can be destroyed only if a destruction permit has been issued by the Department for Environment and Heritage.

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 8222 9435 for details).

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.

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.

Trim any branches that overhang the house.

Place sheet metal collars, 60cm wide and 60cm above the ground, around tree trunks of trees that provide possum access to your roof and to protect fruit trees.

Provide an alternative home for the possum by installing a possum box. Nest boxes may be obtained from vets specialising in the care of native wildlife, garden shop/plant nurseries, local councils, pet shops, pest controllers or hardware stores.

You can also build your own possum box. Refer to the following website for more information.

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

Spread quassia chips or use blocks of camphor or mothballs in the roof space. This may repel possums and can be purchased at hardware stores. DO NOT use camphor and mothballs at the same time as they react chemically with each other.

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. Ask the pest controller to show you a copy of their permit or ask for their permit number.

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.

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.

Relocating possums

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.

If possum numbers are declining why can't I release the possum down the road or in a park or reserve?

Unfortunately, the solution is not as simple as releasing a trapped possum down the road, or into a park or reserve. Possums have declined in regional areas due to fox and cat 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. Relocating possums may also spread disease if the animal is sick. Australia has lost many of its native animals through habitat destruction and disease. Please help protect what remaining species we do have left.

Injured possum

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.

Who can I contact?

If you require further information on managing and living in harmony with possums please visit the DEH biodiversity website <http://www.environment.sa.gov.au/biodiversity/possums.html>

To obtain a permit please visit the DEH website <http://www.wildlifepermitsa.gov.au> or contact your nearest Department for Environment and Heritage office.
