

The Possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*)

Introduction

The brushtail possum is an Australian marsupial, first introduced successfully to New Zealand in 1858. The lure of a lucrative fur industry resulted in both legal and illegal liberations from as early as 1840 until at least 1940.

Natural predators of the possum are largely absent from New Zealand and there are now an estimated 70 million possums throughout the country.

The greatest densities in Hawke's Bay are found on the coastal country. Possums are also very prevalent in the forest/pasture margins as these areas provide a plentiful supply of food and suitable habitat. The Department of Conservation has estimated possum density across the North Island as being between 2-15 possums per hectare.

Description

Possums in New Zealand occur as two colour types, "blacks" and "greys". Adult male blacks vary from rich red-brown to brown, the females have a darker or black-brown fur. Adult male greys are often strongly rufous (reddish) in the neck and shoulders. The greys often have a distinct silver tinge in the fur.

Lifecycle

Under ideal conditions, adult possums weigh an average of 3-4kg, and have a lifespan of around nine years. Possums reach full reproductive maturity at between 1 and 2 years of age.



Breeding occurs from late March until early May, with a gestation period of 17-19 days. Most females raise only a single offspring (joey) per year, multiple births being rare. Excellent conditions can result in the birth of a second joey in the spring. The joey at birth is hairless, blind and weighs a mere 0.2 grams. It crawls into the mothers pouch where it stays for five months, before transferring to her back. Weaning occurs at 6-8 months, but some-

times the youngster remains with the mother until it is one year old.

Habitat

Possums are nocturnal, feeding at night and sleeping in nests (dens) during the day. They are reluctant to leave the den in heavy rain and feed only between showers.

Dens are sited in dark, dry places such as under floors or inside walls or roofs of houses and sheds, under tree roots, in hollow logs, holes in banks, perching plants, or in clumps of flax, gorse and bracken fern.

Possums appear to follow the same track each night. This produces a distinctive, flattened pathway through grass or undergrowth, known as a 'possum pad'. At times it is possible to follow this pad, which is usually used by several possums, back to the den site.

What is the problem?

Possums cause three major problems in New Zealand.

1. Spread of Bovine Tuberculosis

Like many other animals, possums are susceptible to infection by Bovine Tuberculosis (Bovine Tb), a disease which persists in possum populations for long periods of time. Possums can pass the infection to cattle and deer. The presence of Bovine Tb in beef, dairy and deer herds jeopardises product access to overseas markets. Possums are controlled to reduce the risk of Bovine Tb being spread to cattle and deer herds. This programme is managed by the Animal Health Board.

2. Destruction of biodiversity

Possums devour the leaves of over 70 native tree species, and high possum numbers defoliate and kill native forests.

3. Economic Damage

Possums damage horticultural, orchard and home garden crops, and young pines are often ruined by bark clawing and breakage of leading shoots. Possums compete with stock for grazing. 6-7 possums are estimated to eat as much pasture as one sheep. Possums are known to eat native land snails, insects, birds' eggs and chicks

Animal pest status

The possum is designated a regional control animal pest.

The control of possums is managed under the Regional Pest Management Strategy 2013-2018.

A range of management methods are being used. The self-help principal method is the establishment of Possum Control Areas where the council arranges for initial possum control to low densities to be carried out and then requires landowners to maintain these low densities. Council continues to support landowners in this control work through subsidising possum bait, providing advice and being involved in possum control in QEII National Trust covenanted areas.

For further information see the Environment Topics “A Guide to Self-Help Possum Control Areas” and “Subsidised Pest Control Products” or contact your Animal Pest Biosecurity Officer.

Possums are declared wild animals under the Wild Animal Control Act 1977. Consequently it is an offence under this Act to keep possums as pets or sell possums without a licence from the Department of Conservation.

What you can do?

Landowners can carry out their own possum control work using the following methods:

- **Habitat manipulation**

Removing sites where possums are likely to nest will discourage them:

- » Destroy patches of gorse and blackberry.
- » Burn all piles of logs around the farm, particularly in gullies.
- » Remove any dead trees or stumps
- » Close off haysheds, old houses, woolsheds and implement sheds using wire netting to cover any holes.

- **Trapping**
- **Bait Stations**
- **Night Shooting**
- **Poisoning**

Ask your Regional Council Animal Pest Advisor for information and advice on the most effective control method for your possum control requirements. Also ask for the Environment Topics available on bait stations, use of poisons and traps.

Possum browse calendar

The calendar indicates what possums generally feed on during the year. Knowing their food source is helpful when planning where and when to carry out possum control operations.

The calendar is a guide only as food species may overlap into other months. There could be a 4-6 week variation depending on location and local conditions. Checking the gut content of shot or trapped possums is another good indicator of food source.

Acknowledgements

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For further information

For further information on animal pests or the Regional Pest Management Strategy, please contact the Biosecurity Team at the Hawke's Bay Regional Council.

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	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Taraire	█											
Kahikatea	█											
Puriri	█											
Miro berries		█										
Karaka		█										
Kohekohe			█	█								
Whiteywood/ Mahoe			█			█						
Five finger				█								
Kowhai								█	█			
Pohutukawa										█	█	
Tutu				█	█							
Totara												█
Macrocarpa					█							
Oak									█			
Kanuka						█	█					
Cabbage tree												█

	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
Pine					█	█	█	█	█			
Eucalyptus										█		
Willow									█	█	█	█
Poplar*										█	█	█
Blackberry		█										
Rose									█			
Citrus									█			
Orchard fruit	█	█	█									
Coastal boneseed												█
Grasses		█	█	█	█	█	█	█				
Clover					█							
Mushrooms		█	█									
Fungi		█	█									
Invertebrates			█	█	█	█	█	█				
Birds eggs									█	█		
Young chicks										█		