

Possum

Trichosurus vulpecula

What does it look like?

Possums are furry animals of medium to stout build with thick, bushy tails. Their bodies are 38-45cm long (65-95cm long including the tail) and their weight varies greatly but averages 2-3kg. There are two main colour forms, grey and black. Possums have large eyes and catlike whiskers, which are characteristic of nocturnal animals.

Possums can live anywhere that has shelter and a varied food supply. Forests are their favoured habitat but forest/pasture margins can also support very dense populations of possums. Possums feed mainly on leaves but also take buds, flowers, fruits, ferns, bark, fungi, invertebrates (including land snails and weta), native birds and their eggs and carrion. They are nocturnal, but in winter starving or sick animals may emerge to feed in the afternoon.

Why is it a problem?

Possums are able to occupy a range of habitats and can survive on poor or irregular food supplies. By eating plant foliage they damage and destroy forests and affect pasture, vegetable and horticultural crops. Possums can be a vector in the spread of diseases that affect domestic animals and humans, such as tuberculosis.

Possum populations expand their range by the gradual spread of female offspring on the edge of occupied home ranges. Their ability to produce more than one offspring per year and the enhanced survival of juvenile females when conditions are good, allows possum populations to increase rapidly in newly invaded areas or after populations have been reduced by control pressure.

The average life span of a possum is 7 to 10 years. Most female possums breed from one year of age and can produce one or, less commonly, two young in a season if food supplies are adequate. Young possums spend the first part of their life in their mother's pouch, feeding on rich milk. After weaning at 5-8 months, young females tend to remain close to their mother's home range. Young males disperse randomly in search of receptive females and have been recorded migrating between 0.5 to 20 kilometres.



Control Methods

Options:

- Trapping
- Poisoning
- Shooting

Traps

There are two main types of possum traps – live capture or kill traps. As with poisons, each has advantages and disadvantages depending on the situation.

Kill traps

There are many different designs, but the principle is to quickly and humanely kill the possum. Some traps are better than others and often the way the trap is set can make a difference to its effectiveness. Timms traps, are effective and easy to set and are one of the most common kill traps available. Other possums traps include: Flipping Timmy trap, Possum Masters, the Warrior and Goodnature A12 possum trap. More information about these traps can be found at the Trapping link below.

The main advantage of kill traps is that they don't need to be checked daily. Traps may be left in place for long periods and they are cost-effective as a long-term control technique. Kill traps are seen as a danger to domestic cats however any risk can be reduced by using baits which cats won't eat or by keeping cats indoors while traps are set. Traps can also become weak or worn over time and lessen the ability kill humanely. Possums can also become trap shy if kill traps are not set correctly and they can be dangerous to other non-target species for the same reason.

Live capture traps

There are two main types of live capture traps. The first is usually a box or cage which is baited to lure an animal in, then the door is activated to close and lock behind it. The second are leg-hold traps which are small steel spring-loaded jaws that clamp and hold the possum's leg just above the paw when it stands on the trap.

Box or cage traps usually work well around built areas where non-target species may be at risk. Trap-shy animals can also be lured in by pre-baiting around the outside of the trap with favoured bait. Animals caught are unharmed but must be humanely disposed of. (It should be noted that the once common method of drowning has been found to be inhumane and is now illegal).

Leg-hold traps have a long history of being very effective at catching possums for both control and the fur trade. **Leg hold traps with serrated jaws and large traps with unpadded jaws are now banned.** To help prevent accidental capture of Kiwi, all leg hold traps need to be set 70cm of the ground in areas where kiwi may be present. Also as protection for cats, no leg-hold trap may be set within 150 metres of a dwelling without permission from the occupier.

New possum traps are in constant development including self-setting and multiple-kill traps.

A person who, for the purpose of capturing alive a mammal, bird, reptile, or amphibian, sets a trap or causes a trap to be set must inspect the trap, or cause a competent person to inspect that trap, within 12 hours after sunrise on each day the trap remains set, beginning on the day immediately after the day on which the trap is set.

Poisoning

For more information contact the Pest Animal team at GW.

Shooting

Night shooting possums using a spotlight is a popular method of control in semi-open areas where access at night is easy. The red eye reflections of a possum can be easily seen and by knowing the seasonal feeding habits and targeting these areas, possums can be controlled. However, possums can become light shy and avoid hunters. Shooting can also become less effective if over-used particularly when possums are regularly missed.

NB: A VALID NEW ZEALAND GUN LICENCE IS REQUIRED UNDER NEW ZEALAND LAW FOR ANY USE OF FIRE ARMS.

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Related Links

Landcare Research - Vertebrate Pest Control <https://pestdss.landcareresearch.co.nz/Possums/Location>

GW Regional Pest Management Plan <https://www.gw.govt.nz/environment/pest-management/>

Trapping <https://www.gw.govt.nz/environment/pest-management/pest-animals/trapping/>

Regional Predator Control Program <https://www.gw.govt.nz/your-region/plans-policies-and-bylaws/plans-and-reports/environmental-plans/regional-pest-management-plan/regional-possum-predator-control-programme>

Practical Guide to Trapping <https://www.doc.govt.nz/globalassets/documents/conservation/threats-and-impacts/pf2050/trapping-guide-pf2050.pdf>

Predator Free NZ YouTube channel <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC7uWDBdIfTbwHXdJSeB43zA>

Rules

Under Section 52 and 53 of the Biosecurity Act 1993 no person can sell, propagate, breed, distribute or otherwise spread any pest in a Pest Management Plan, or any unwanted organism. Not complying with Section 52 or 53 is an offence under the Act, and may result in penalties noted in Section 157(1).

Management Programme

Site-led