

Fact Sheet

6

Possums and people

Fossil possums

Possums have lived in Australia for millions of years. Fossil remains of possums have been found that are over 23 million years old. In South Australia, there are significant fossil possum sites at Lake Eyre, the Naracoorte Caves and Curramulka Cave on the Yorke Peninsula. Some of the fossils that have been found are of possums that are extinct. For example, a giant ringtail possum, thought to weigh around 10kg, was 10 times heavier than the common ringtails of today.

Aboriginal history and possums

Aboriginal people came to Australia more than 40 000 years ago and possums species are part of the Aboriginal Dreaming. Possums have been used as a source of food and possum skins have been used to make clothing and for a game called Marn Grook. In Marn Grook, a rolled-up possum skin is kicked and caught, in a similar style to Australian Rules Football.

European settlement and possums

When Captain Cook visited Australia during 1770, the botanist aboard his ship, Sir Joseph Banks, collected a common ringtail possum. That collection was the first recorded Australian possum collection by a European.

Possum distribution has changed since the settlement of European people. We have dramatically changed the landscape, replacing many open forests that covered large areas of South Australia with farms, towns and cities. Interestingly, some possum species have adapted to live close to people. In fact, the number of brushtail possums is declining in the regional areas they once occupied, but they are often common in cities. It is very unusual to have marsupials living right in the middle of cities.

Possums living close to people

In South Australia we have a great variety of fascinating wildlife, including possums. Native wildlife can often be found living very close to people and even in urban areas. Many people appreciate the opportunity to see native animals regularly and close to their homes. For example, people watch birds, butterflies, bluetongue lizards, koalas, geckos and frogs.

Possums can be observed around homes and sometimes people find them to be a problem. Possums can make noise at night, running across roofs and defending their territory. In some cases, possums cause damage to houses and property. They can eat people's rose buds and fruit, or shelter in roofs where they can stain walls and ceilings with their urine.

