

# Australian Threatened Species 2007

## Western ringtail possum

*Pseudocheirus occidentalis*

### Conservation status



Western ringtail possum. © L. Jackes/Shire of Busselton

**Australian Government:**  
Vulnerable (*Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act 1999*)

**Western Australia:** Threatened (*Wildlife Conservation Act 1950*)

### What does it look like?

The western ringtail possum (*Pseudocheirus occidentalis*) has a dark brown or grey coat and a strong, white-tipped tail, which helps it move through the forest and carry nest-building materials like leaves and twigs. Its body and tail are both 300–400 millimetres long and it weighs up to 1.1 kilograms. The western ringtail possum is very different from the brushtail possum, which is bigger with longer fur and a brush tail.

### Where does it live?

The western ringtail possum is a highly arboreal possum, spending most of its time feeding, resting and socialising high in the forest canopy. Historically, the western ringtail possum was commonly found throughout the forests of the south west of Western Australia. Populations are now limited to three areas, with the largest one near the town of Busselton.

Today, the western ringtail possum can be found living in coastal peppermint (*Agonis flexuosa*) woodlands and ludlow tuart (*Eucalyptus gomphocephala*) forests, where it mainly feeds on peppermint tree leaves.

### Western ringtail possum lifestyle

The western ringtail possum is nocturnal. During the day the possum sleeps in hollows of ancient eucalypt trees in the tuart forest, or in 'Dreys', which are nests the size of a soccer ball made out of branches and leaves. It sometimes nests on the ground in the dense understorey of peppermint woodlands, particularly in areas where it is safe from predators such as foxes, cats and dogs.

The western ringtail possum is a marsupial and the female usually raises one young or 'joey' although it can have two to three at a time. The joey stays in the pouch for three months, but is dependant on the mother for up to seven months.

# Western ringtail possum

## Threats to the western ringtail possum

The western ringtail possum has disappeared from 90 per cent of its original range due to a number of threats including habitat loss due to land clearing and logging, and introduced predators such as foxes and cats.

Habitat loss has resulted in remaining bushland becoming fragmented, which means the possum can't travel safely through the bush and is more vulnerable to predation.

Habitat loss also results in the lack of old trees with suitable hollows for the possum to rest in. Some of these trees take hundreds of years to grow to a suitable size to provide hollows.

The most significant threat to the species currently is the ongoing clearing of habitat in the Busselton area for urban development.

## How does it benefit from protected areas?

Protected areas, such as national parks and conservation reserves, have a direct influence on western ringtail possum recovery. The possum relies on areas of peppermint woodland connected with corridors of vegetation. This allows movement between patches of bush, which have become fragmented due to land clearing. In addition, the possum also relies on private land to provide habitat and form part of vegetation corridors. It is important that these areas are also protected as the long term survival and recovery of the western ringtail possum is linked to suitable habitat availability.

## What you can do to help

- Conserve remnant bushland for the possum by placing a covenant or voluntary management agreement on your property.
- Plant native species in your gardens to provide habitat and food for native species, particularly peppermint trees in western ringtail possum areas.
- Join your local community group and get involved in threatened species recovery.
- Protect remnant bushland that supports threatened species including western ringtail possum by fencing, controlling feral species and removing weeds.
- Prevent injury and death of the western ringtail possum by controlling domestic pets and driving with care at night.
- Help the western ringtail possum by reporting any activities you see that are likely to harm them or their habitat to the Department of the Environment and Water Resources—Compliance and Enforcement Branch. Visit [www.environment.gov.au/epbc/compliance/index.html](http://www.environment.gov.au/epbc/compliance/index.html) or freecall 1800 110 395 for more information.



Western ringtail possum 'drey'. © Martin Pritchard

## Case study: Providing habitat for the western ringtail possum

The Western Ringtail Action Group was established in May 2006, and has representatives from the wider community, Fostering and Assistance for Wildlife Needing Aid, Shire of Busselton, Busselton Naturalists' Club, Department of Environment and Conservation, Busselton-Dunsborough Environment Centre and GeoCatch—all working towards the recovery of the western ringtail possum.

The Busselton area is one of the last major strongholds for the western ringtail possum. Urban development of the area has resulted in loss of habitat. Protecting important areas of the remaining habitat and strengthening connective corridors will increase its chances of survival.

In 2006, the group was awarded a Threatened Species Network Community

Grant. It aimed at assessing habitat within the Busselton urban area to identify priority areas for protection and corridors, revegetating these areas with peppermint trees, raising awareness in the community, and training community members in surveying techniques.

Peppermint leaves (*Agonis flexuosa*) constitute 90–95 per cent of the western ringtail possums' diet and are also used in construction of dreys. Many of these trees have been removed from urban areas. The Western Ringtail Action Group are planting 3000 peppermint trees to form habitat corridors, which will provide critical habitat for the possums and result in improved connectivity between remnant bushland within Busselton.

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You can find out more information about protecting private property by contacting your state TSN Coordinator, visiting [www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/incentives/covenants.html](http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/incentives/covenants.html) or by contacting the Department of the Environment and Water Resources Community Information Unit, email [ciu@environment.gov.au](mailto:ciu@environment.gov.au), or freecall 1800 803 772.

## Reference

Visit [www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/ts-day/index.html](http://www.environment.gov.au/biodiversity/threatened/ts-day/index.html)

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