

Pesky Possums

A single possum chomps its way through about 300 grams of vegetation per sitting; this means in total about 21,000 tonnes of our native and exotic vegetation is destroyed every night.

Our Role

Horizons works to control possum numbers in important habitats like native bush remnants. We have also been working in partnership with the Animal Health Board (AHB) to control possum numbers to reduce the occurrence of Tb in deer and cattle herds. As the AHB is likely to withdraw funding for possum control for Tb over the next few years, we plan to step up control operations to ensure both the protection of native habitats and the ongoing reduction of Tb incidence in our Region.

Identification

Possums are nocturnal animals, just under half a metre long from its snout to the base of its thick bushy tail. Though often seen on the ground, it is equipped for living in trees with powerful hind legs for leaping between branches and hand-like paws, well suited for climbing and holding food. They have long, sharp claws allowing them to easily run up tree trunks. In the canopy the possum's long tail can wrap tightly around a branch, supporting its whole weight as it reaches out for food with its front legs. You will probably have heard their distinctive rasping coughing call.



Why are they a pest?

- Possums eat native trees and plants, ignoring old leaves and selecting the best new growth. They can stop the forest regenerating, cause the canopy to collapse, wipe out rata, fuschia and other native species, systematically stripping trees.
- Possums eat the berries, flowers and insects that are food for our native birds. They disturb nesting birds, eat their eggs and chicks and may impact on native land snails.
- In exotic forest plantations their browsing kills young trees and stunts the growth of older trees by ring-barking them or breaking the uppermost branches.
- They destroy poplars and willows planted to control hill-country and river bank erosion.
- Possums directly damage pastoral farming by eating millions of dollars worth of pasture each year. They have a strong preference for pasture plants, such as clover and herbs.
- Possums damage orchards, horticultural crops, commercial forests, shelterbelts, and are a big nuisance around gardens and homes.
- They carry and spread the disease bovine tuberculosis (Tb) to cattle and deer herds. This presents a risk to our overseas trade in beef, dairy and venison products.(see our Tb flyer for more information)

Control

Poisoning and trapping are the best possum control methods.

- **Poisoning**

Anticoagulant poisons like Pestoff and Talon are available for purchase by the public and must be used with a bait station. These poisons work by reducing the clotting ability of the blood causing internal haemorrhaging. Possums will die ten to twenty days after consuming a lethal dose of these poisons.

Setting up a bait station:

Bait stations can be attached to a tree, preferably above a fork or on a fence post. If the bait station is in an area with children and pets make sure you place it out of their reach, at least 1.5metres from the ground. In other areas, place the bait stations 20-25cm above the ground to allow possums to sit while feeding.

Place the stations no more than 150m apart, or approximately one station per hectare. They should face away from prevailing wind and be placed upright so that water will not pool inside.

Baiting:

Fill the stations with the bait and maintain the supply for the next two weeks. Possums sometimes take one or two nights to find the stations and begin feeding.

If you live near an area of high possum density, you may find that new possums move onto your property soon after the removal of the resident ones. In this situation, keep the bait station in place and refill with fresh bait every three to four weeks, depending on the rate of re-invasion.

Dispose of any uneaten bait in the station before refilling it with fresh bait. Dispose of the bait by wrapping it securely in a rubbish bag or burying it at least 60cm in the ground.

To maximise the shelf life of the remaining bait, store the bag in a cool dry place. Close the bag as tightly as possible.

All poisons suitable for bait stations are coloured either green or blue. They are dangerous if eaten. For first aid and safe use of toxins, refer to the manufacturer's instructions on the packaging.

- **Trapping**

The Timms trap and Live Capture trap are best, although if you opt to use a live capture trap you will need to consider how you will kill the animal.

- **Timms trap**

The most effective, simple and safe way to catch a possum in an urban environment is to use a Timms trap. They are easy to set and are best baited with fruit like apple, orange or kiwifruit. Sprinkling the fruit with cinnamon will make it more attractive to the possum and less so to birds and cats. Don't use meat or fish as bait as these are likely to attract cats. These traps kill possums quickly using a spring loaded metal mouth so remember to keep pets away!

Timms traps can be purchased from farm supply stores, some hardware stores and can be loaned from Horizons. We charge a small bond which is refunded on return of the trap.

Traps should be set on a level surface, either placed on the ground or fastened to the top of a fence railing or post. Set the traps in areas where possums are known to frequent:

To set the trap:

- 1.** Make sure the trap is unset (step 4). Turn the trap upside down and push the fruit bait onto the bait rod as far as the bend.
- 2.** Place the trap the right way up. Press down on the top of the trap while pulling the nylon cord with your other hand until the striker bar locks into position. When the trap is unset the sensitivity of the trigger action can be adjusted by bending the bait rod where it contacts the cross rod (approximately 50mm from the tip).
- 3.** To remove a possum from the trap, pull the nylon cord to release the pressure on the striker bar and pull the possum free.

Dead possums can be buried in the garden or secured in a plastic bag and put out in your domestic rubbish bag.

Some possums will also be carrying a joey (baby possum) in their pouch. They also need to be destroyed by a firm blow to the head.

- 4.** To unset the trap, trigger the mechanism by smacking the sides of the trap heavily with your open palms.

○ Live capture trap

These are cages that catch the possum when it reaches for bait attached to a trigger arm, releasing the trip pin and closing the door. The main advantage of these traps is if you catch a pet or non-target animal it can be released unharmed.

Set the traps in areas where possums are known to frequent; fruit trees, vegetable gardens, trees with signs of possum browse, flattened possum tracks, storage and hay sheds. Set the trap by attaching a piece of fruit to the trigger arm, lifting the door and holding it open with the trip pin.

Because the possum is trapped live you will need to dispose of it humanely – remove the possum from the trap by coaxing it towards the back, grabbing its tail and pulling it out. Allow the front paws to maintain contact with the ground to prevent it climbing on you. Deliver a sharp blow between and slightly forward of the ears using a heavy stick or hammer to stun it, then place the animal on a hard rock or stump where another hard blow to the same area will kill it. If you are unable to kill it yourself, your local vet may be able to dispose of it for you at your cost. Live capture traps can be purchased from farm supply stores.

Free phone us on 0508 800 800 if you would like help or advice with possums on your property. We can provide free advice and information and if needed, user-pays assistance.

Pesky Possums in Urban Areas

A shadowy figure crossing the roof tops at night, a mysterious scratching at the window...an intruder?...No, it's a METRO POSSUM!

Possums are sometimes seen in urban areas, running across a street, up a lamppost, in trees or on house roofs. If left unchecked, they will set up a den inside the wall or roof of a house, in a shed, basement, under floorboards, or anywhere that is dry and dark.

A possum in the house...

Possums have sharp claws and a strong tail, enabling them to climb the side of a house and scratch their way through rotting weatherboards.

If you discover a possum inside your house at night, do not chase it as its sharp claws and erratic behaviour could damage furniture. Turn off the lights and open doors and windows to let it out. If you wait until morning you will probably find it asleep in a dark corner or under furniture.

To pick up a live possum, grasp it firmly by the end of its tail, making sure to hold it well away from your body, and swing it gently back and forwards. Make sure the tip of the tail is kept straight so it can't swing up using its tail.

How do you know the culprit is a possum?

Before you start any control programme, make sure you have correctly identified the pest is a possum.

Damage caused by possums browsing is distinctive:

- Possums are untidy eaters and the ground will be littered with half eaten leaves, flowers or fruit.
- The stalk and midrib are left in broadleaf species.
- Small branches may be broken near the top of trees.
- Possums may leave track marks, particularly through grass.
- Claw marks on trees and fence posts may be visible.
- Possum droppings are about 2.5cm long and thicker than a pencil.
- Possums are highly territorial and fights may be heard or fur left behind.

Catching an urban possum

Trapping is the most effective way to catch possums in town. The Timms trap and Live Capture trap are best, although if you opt to use a live capture trap you will need to consider how you will kill the animal.

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- **Live capture trap**

These are cages that catch the possum when it reaches for bait attached to a trigger arm, releasing the trip pin and closing the door. The main advantage of these traps is if you catch a pet or non-target animal it can be released unharmed.

Traps should be placed near to the plants that are being attacked. Set the trap by attaching a piece of fruit to the trigger arm, lifting the door and holding it open with the trip pin.

Because the possum is trapped live you will need to dispose of it humanely – remove the possum from the trap by coaxing it towards the back, grabbing its tail and pulling it out. Allow the front paws to maintain contact with the ground to prevent it climbing on you. Deliver a sharp blow between and slightly forward of the ears using a heavy stick or hammer to stun it, then place the animal on a hard rock or stump where another hard blow to the same area will kill it. If you are unable to kill it yourself, your local vet may be able to dispose of it for you at your cost.

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