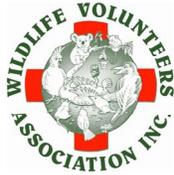


Building a Nest box for Brushtail Possums – FACT SHEET --- 12



Wildlife Volunteers Association Inc. (WILVOS)

If you need assistance with native wildlife call our hotline number

54 416200 This fact sheet contains information from WILVOS own research, members of other wildlife care groups, and independent expert advice.



SHORT-EARED POSSUM *Trichosurus caninus* (as opposed to southern cousin *Trichosurus cunninghami*)



COMMON BRUSHTAIL POSSUM *Trichosurus vulpecular* Photos: Donna Anthony

Photo: Sylvia Whiting

Habitat: The Common Brushtail Possum is a common resident in suburbia and surrounding environs. Their natural habitat is dry eucalypt forest, which provides their favourite foliage. As hollows disappear from our forests, housing is sought out elsewhere. The Mountain Brushtail Possum (Bobuck) and its northern cousin, the Short-eared Possum prefer wet sclerophyll forests.

Breeding: Brushtails give birth to a single young in autumn or spring which lives in the pouch for 4 - 5 months before riding on Mum's back. Mortality is high once the young brushtails leave to establish their own home range. The majority of brushtails killed on our roads are young males leaving home. Nevertheless, females are also victims, so animals always need to be checked for pouch young.

Behaviour: These are the possums that sometimes move into our homes. Brushtails are very adaptable animals, and in the absence of suitable hollows, will nest in roofs and walls. They should not be relocated for the simple reason that tree species may not be suitable food, and areas that do meet the criteria may already be over-populated with the species, resulting in territorial fights.

The Common Brushtails lead quite a solitary life, so these possums are very territorial, defending their range with deep guttural coughs and hisses.

1. Introduction

Natural tree hollows form when fungus and termites eat out the dead centre of old trees. Most Eucalypt species do not form these hollows until they are at least 100 years old. Although there are vast tracts of native plantation timber (particularly on the East Coast), they are typically harvested at around 60 - 80 years old. So of course hollows do not form. Also, landholders often do not see the benefit of leaving old hollow trees.

Since European settlement, literally millions of trees (and hollows) have been lost to urbanisation, industry, roads, and agriculture. As if that isn't bad enough, our struggling native animals have to compete with introduced Honey Bees and the Common Indian Mynas (these are brown in colour, not the grey of our native Noisy Miners) which aggressively colonise hollows.

These factors have led to some pretty desperate little mammals trying to live in somewhat 'B grade' accommodation. Some examples are: Sugar Gliders trying to live in the fronds of Banana trees, Ringtail possums in the fronds of exotic palm trees, Feathertail Gliders turning up in the electricity boxes, or on top of power poles, or even in the pockets of rain coats in the shed! Also we see microbats trying to sleep in mailboxes, and our seldom seen little Antechinus' trying to raise their babies in cupboard drawers, and even in cars. This movement into human territory leads to disastrous situations which see the injured or orphaned wildlife coming into our carer's hands and desperately needing rehabilitation.

2. Benefits of Nestboxes

Although we cannot possibly hope to replace the countless natural hollows lost in the bush, because our towns, cities, and farms have replaced what once was forest. As a result, there are so many displaced wildlife competing for this decreasing homeland. This is where we can all really make a difference in our suburban gardens, and rural properties.

A single well-placed nestbox, which survives say 10 years, can see a pair of Rosellas raise 10 generations of chicks. A slightly different box could provide a secure home to 6 adult Sugar Gliders. Different shaped boxes again could provide a much-needed home for that pesky possum in your roof. Another nestbox design could provide five star accommodation for up to 50 Microbats. When you consider that a single Microbat can consume one half its own weight in insects a night, then they are doing us all a big favour in reducing insect populations naturally. Our native shrubs and even the veggie garden benefit!

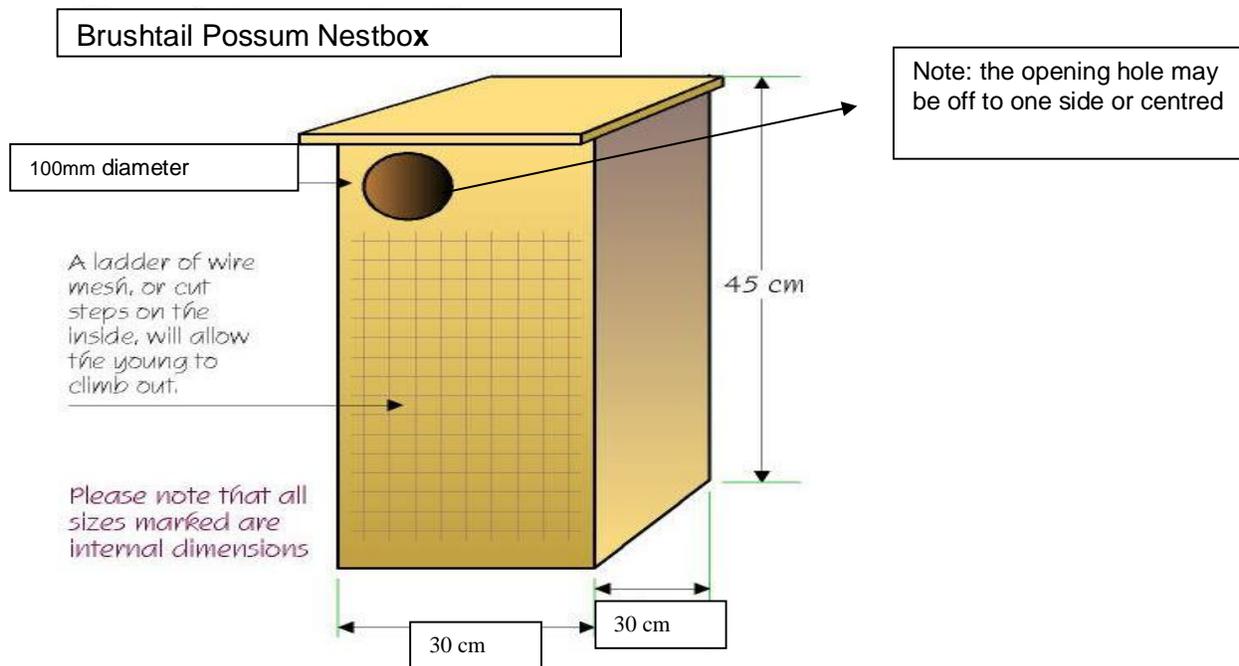
Nestboxes also provide priceless education for your children. Watching wildlife on TV is wonderful, but there is something very special about watching native animals coming and going, feeding, and raising their young so close to your home. If you've ever seen a Possum looking out of her box at dusk, pink nose resting on front paws - you'll know what I mean.

Nestboxes are fun, easy and cheap to make, and once up will provide a secure home for many years to come.

A word of caution: If you own a cat, and it is not contained in a cat aviary, then putting up nestboxes which attract birds & mammals to your garden is a recipe for disaster...

3. Construction

Below is a plan for the construction of a nestbox suitable for Brushtail Possums. Materials used, and notes are below the plan. Please note that all sizes marked are for INTERNAL DIMENSIONS.



The best materials for construction are either, 3 cm thick plantation pine (hardwood is a product of native forest), or structural pine plywood. There is of course no need to use expensive dressed timber. Rough sawn or even second hand timber is ideal. Just make sure if using second hand, that it is free of nails, and any unknown paint. Your box is best screwed, rather than nailed together.

The roof can either be hinged conventionally, or simply make an outside hinge out of a piece of old rubber, which also helps to make it weatherproof. A couple of off cuts on the inside of the roof to prevent slippage, and either mesh, or a few thin strips of off-cut baton on the inside front to allow the youngsters to climb out.

VERY IMPORTANT: Drill a few 5mm drainage holes in the base. Young birds have quite literally drowned in non-drained boxes. Finally, throw dead leaves from native trees in the bottom, almost up to the entry/exit hole, and the box is ready for habitation.

4. Installation

So you're now the proud owner of a new Brushtail Possum nestbox. Where to place it?

Aspect: Choose your position carefully. Think about which side of your house takes the brunt of cold wind, burning sun and driving rain. (Face the entrance away from prevailing winds, and make sure that the box will have plenty of shade during the hottest part of the day.)

Hang the box from the chosen tree by a piece of wire threaded through a scrap piece of garden hose (so that it doesn't cut into the tree), or alternatively, nailed to the tree using 2 strips of galvanised steel. The strips need only go halfway round the tree to allow for growth, and to prevent ringbarking.

FOR BRUSHTAIL POSSUMS, you need to position the box at least 3 - 5 metres above the ground.

OK. So your new nestbox is in place, and you're sitting back with a 'cuppa' waiting for the destitute possums to move into their new home. Don't be disappointed or surprised if no one takes up residence immediately. It can sometimes take weeks, or even months, for someone to show some interest. There are many reasons for this:

- The box is 'too new', unfamiliar. It looks and smells new and out of place. Give it time to 'weather', to become part of the local landscape.
- Most birds, for instance, nest in the spring. Birds don't normally live in nests, as they only require them for breeding. If your box went up in May, it may not be required until say October.
- Mammals such as possums do live in hollows all year round, but it's not until the parents actually kick the youngsters out of home, that junior will go in search of a new home.
- While you're waiting for the box to be occupied, please resist the temptation to keep looking inside. You don't know who's checking the box out when you're not looking, and constant disturbance will only discourage them. You'll know when the locals move in by watching, listening, and by looking for droppings underneath. Possums are easiest to see exiting their box at night if viewed side-on.

Also, do not be alarmed if 'the wrong animal' moves into the nestbox. Hey, if an Eastern Rosella moves into the box you so carefully made for a Brushtail Possum, so be it. Obviously the Rosella's need was greater. Native animals will often move into the 'wrong sized' box. WILVOS have observed Owllet Nightjars in possum boxes.

5. Maintenance

Maintenance is necessary. Once a year, just have a quick look to see if any repairs need to be done, replacing any rotten parts, or making sure the box is still securely fastened to the tree. Also, watch that the growing tree doesn't pull apart the fastening.

Birds: Some introduced birds such as Sparrows, Starlings, and Mynas have become a menace; driving native birds away, or even building their own nests on top of existing eggs or young. Nest building by these species should be discouraged by removing nesting materials or eggs. If Indian Mynas are a continual problem, you may want to add a Myna baffle to the front of the box, or put a crabpot out to catch the Common Indian Mynas.

Bees: The introduced honeybee has also become a serious problem in some areas. They will readily colonise tree hollows (real or artificial). If you have a problem with bees, look up beekeepers in your Yellow Pages.

If you've taken the time to build and place a box like this, pat yourself on the back. YOU WILL have made a difference to YOUR local environment. Congratulations.

SEE OUR FACT SHEET: Wildlife Friendly Gardens, – FACT SHEET -- 2



Common Brushtail Possum *Trichosurus vulpecular*
Photo: Donna Anthony