

**Trichosurus vulpecula** (Kerr, 1792)

The brushtail possum (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) is a solitary, nocturnal, arboreal marsupial native to Australia. The brushtail possum was introduced to New Zealand to establish a fur trade and populations of 60 million have been estimated. Brushtail possums damage native forests, preys on bird nests and are a vector for bovine tuberculosis.

The brushtail possum is a cat-sized phalanger (2-4kg) with a bushy, prehensile tail, strong claws, a pointed snout, brown eyes and prominent ears, which are naked on the inside. The fur is thick and woolly; either grey or “black”. Grey individuals have a grizzled back and sides, with paler (whitish) under parts, a dark snout and chin and a pink nose.

Brushtail possums have multiple impacts in New Zealand, as a browser of forest vegetation, frugivore, and competitor for tree hollows, predator of invertebrates and bird nests, and as a vector of disease. Long term changes in forest structure and composition (including canopy collapse in extreme cases) can result from sustained possum browsing pressure.

Some highly palatable and chemically “unprotected” plant species are so preferred by brushtail possums that their selective browsing can result in local plant extinctions. Effects on native wildlife include depletion of fruit crops, competition for tree hollows, and predation by possums on invertebrates and the eggs and nestlings of birds (including threatened species). Possums are vectors of bovine tuberculosis, and consequently pose a significant threat to cattle, deer and dairy industries.

It has been illegal to harbour and release brushtail possums into the wild in New Zealand since the 1940’s. Possums are trapped and poisoned; ground based poison control is often backed up with physical methods such as trapping and shooting. Biological control methods such as immunocontraception vaccines that will reduce possum breeding are being considered.

**Reference:**

Global Invasive Species Database (GISD), 2011. *Trichosurus vulpecula* (Kerr, 1792) [link]