

Should I offer backyard brushtail possums food?







Offering backyard brushtail possums food is not recommended.

Brushtail possums have successfully adapted to the urban environment and it is often tempting to provide food for our backyard residents. However, by feeding native animals we may be doing more harm than good. Providing non-natural food sources to native animals can lead to **nutritional imbalances**, increase the **spread of disease**, and result in **negative influences on animal behaviour** and the natural **population dynamics**.

Nutritional imbalances

Human food is not natural for possums and **can make them sick**. Brushtail possums in bushland primarily eat leaves, flowers, fruits and insects. Native animals however love human food which is easy to get and often plentiful. These unnatural foods can cause nutritional imbalances which may lead to **obesity** and other **life threatening complications**.

Even providing 'healthier' food options can be dangerous. Remember possums are much smaller than the average human so **even small portions of human food** can be very unhealthy for them. Along with the associated health risks from a bad diet, overweight animals are less able to evade predators.

IF YOU FEED A BRUSHTAIL POSSUM:		THE HUMAN EQUIVALENT IS:	
	½ apple =	2 slices of pizza	
	1 banana =	2 burgers	
	5 almonds =	3 slices of pizza	

*kilojoules/day required for a Brushtail Possum has been calculated from equations estimating field metabolic rates.¹ These are then compared to the kilojoules/day required for the average human (8700kj). This is a direct kj/day comparison and does not take into account the specific dietary requirements of different species.

¹Nagy, K.A. Giardi, I.A. Brown, T.K. 1999. Energetics of free-ranging mammals, reptiles and birds. Ann. rev. Nutr. 19:247-277



Foods such as **cake, bread and cookies** provide none of the nutritional requirements possums need on a daily basis and shouldn't be offered. Giving these animals **cooked bones** is also not recommended as these do not digest properly and may cause serious **life threatening complications**.

Spread of Disease

Offering foods such as raw meat can expose animals to **parasitic disease** such as the potentially fatal parasite *Toxoplasma gondii*. If numerous animals are feeding from the one feeding station the risk of **disease transmission** between them is much greater.

Disrupting natural behaviour

With a constant supply of 'easy' human food possums are at risk of becoming less capable and adaptable foragers and **dependent on humans for food**. If the human feeder goes on holiday or moves away the dependent possums may be unable to adapt back to successful foraging.

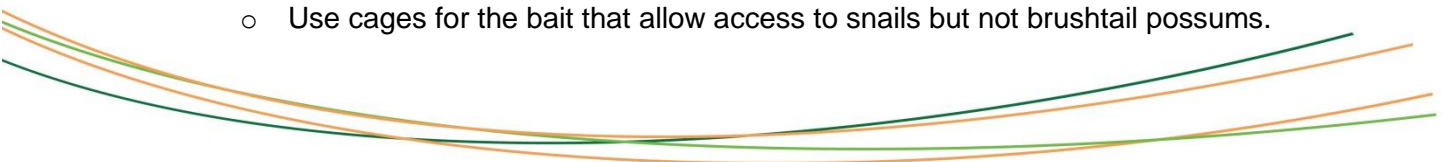
Providing food may attract more animals to that area, abnormally increasing the population density. Increased density of animals can result in **increased aggression** by animals fighting over food and territory and also the **transmission of infectious diseases**, posing a greater health risk for the local possum population.

Feeding possums may also result in a **loss of fear for humans**, and as a result make them **more vulnerable to abuse** by other people and in closer contact with **household pets** i.e. cats and dogs.

What can I do instead to help brushtail possums living in my garden?

There are plenty of things you can do to assist brushtail possums living in your garden, **to encourage their presence without the risk of causing them harm**.

- Ensure they are safe from pets on your property
 - Keep cats indoors, or confined to outdoor enclosures.
 - Provide lots of "escape routes" for possums to get away from dogs – trees and sturdy trellis leading up to high walls and rooftops provide such routes.
- Grow vegetation that will provide natural food sources, like flowers and fruit, for brushtail possums.
- **Provide waterproof nest box in trees on your property to provide nest sites for possums.** Land for Wildlife recommends that they are placed 4m above the ground, facing south away from the sun, with nest material inside the box, and with a cockroach strip taped inside the nest box lid to prevent invasion by bees in spring.
- Avoid using poisons such as snail bait and rat bait – both of which can be fatal to brushtail possums.
 - If using snail baits, use iron EDTA (this may still make brushtail possums sick, but is less likely to cause death).
 - Use cages for the bait that allow access to snails but not brushtail possums.





- **“Wildlife proof” ponds and pools**
 - Use pool covers.
 - Ensure there is an escape route if a possum falls in – e.g. bricks placed on the top step of a pool, or a sturdy stack of bricks onto which a possum can climb to get out of a pond.
- **Do not remove possums from your property and release them elsewhere.** This is illegal (*Wildlife Conservation Act, 1950*). Few brushtail possums survive after being moved in this way.

We do not recommend feeding backyard brushtail possums. However, if you choose to you should aim to minimise the risk of harm:

- Completely avoid unhealthy (and potentially life-threatening) foodstuffs such as **bread, cakes and biscuits, raw meat and cooked bones.**



Bread



**Baked
goods**



**Raw
meat**



**Cooked
bones**

- Offer **very small portions** of safer foods, and **not everyday**.
 - **Small pieces of fruit are the safest option for brushtail possums** – provide a small cube (1cm x 1cm x 1cm) every few days at the most. **Portion size is important!** Large quantities of fruit can make possums sick.
- Offer food in ways that **minimises the risk of harm**.
 - Offer food for possums at high locations, away from pets and foxes, such as by placing it on a tree branch or a feeding station set up in a tree. Ensure the feeding station is regularly cleared of faeces to prevent it becoming a source of infections.

