

Introduced animal pests

Possums

Introduction and establishment

Possums (*Trichosurus vulpecula*) were first brought from Australia in 1837, to Riverton in Southland, to form the basis of a fur industry. This initial attempt failed, and it was not until 1858 that they were successfully introduced at the same place. They are now found in about 95% of all farmland, scrubland and bush.

Most possums – estimated at over 50 million – live in farmland or scrubland. With at least five possums per hectare, another 16 million are reckoned to live in the bush. Their population density in New Zealand is much greater than in most parts of Australia.

Diet

They eat and damage the forest at every point, taking mainly leaves, but also buds, flowers, fruit and seeds from the tallest tree tops. On the ground they eat seedlings, saplings and sometimes bark. Possums also eat parts of perching plants, scramblers, climbers, some tree ferns and fungi. Favoured foods include mistletoes, tree fuchsias, kāmahī and rātā trees, which is why these are among the first species to be eaten out of the forest.

Damage to plants and animals

When possums eat a plant's flowers, the nectar and fruit are reduced. The few berries that grow are also eaten. In one study, an entire crop of kaikōmako berries was eaten in a few nights. Another study revealed that possums ate some 60% of hīnau berries. They rob native birds, bats, lizards and insects of food.

Possum cacophony

With a repertoire of at least 20 different sounds, a possum's calls can be startling:

'There are screeches, grunts, growls, hisses, and chatters (mostly used in aggressive interactions); zook-zooks and squeaks (dependant juveniles and pouch young); and shook-shooks and clicks (males during courtship). The shook-shook sound of the male, resembling the call of juveniles, may serve to reduce female aggression.'¹

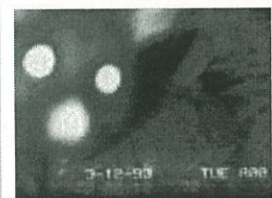
By feeding selectively, possums have radically altered the makeup of forests. In the 1960s, possums opened up large tracts of forest in the Ruahine Range to invading scrub. They have eaten nearly all of the rātā trees from the Aorangi Range, and have almost wiped out mistletoes in the North Island. Large stretches of Westland forest are dotted with possum-killed rātā and kāmahī. When possums are eradicated, as they have been on Kapiti Island, the bush regenerates.



Possum trappers



Possum damage



Eating eggs



Loading possum bait

Possoms also eat insects, bats, birds and their eggs and nestlings. They drive native animals out of their dens and nesting sites.

Controlling possums

Traps, poisons and guns can control possum numbers. However, these are expensive methods, and only practical in easily accessible bush or in bush that is valuable to conservation or farming. This leaves possums uncontrolled over large areas of hinterland. Scientists are searching for new methods of control – the most promising are ways of making possums less fertile.

Footnotes

1. Carolyn King, ed., *The handbook of New Zealand mammals*. 2nd ed. Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2005, p. 85. › Back

Biographies



Thyra Avis Mary Acres, 1910–1994

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