

Leadbeater's Possum

Leadbeater's Possum is found in Victoria. It often lives in Mountain Ash trees. These are the tallest hardwood tree in the world.

Appearance

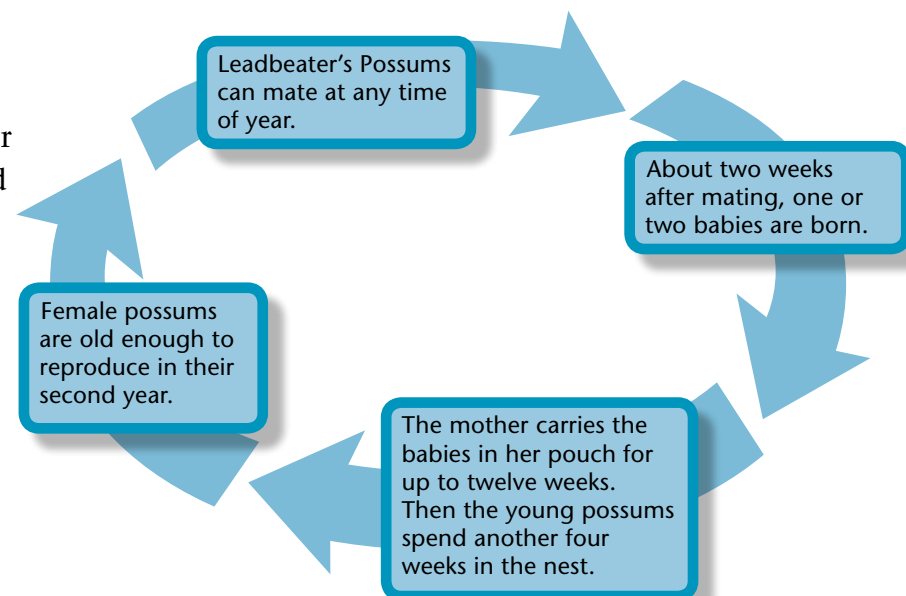
Leadbeater's Possum is a small creature weighing between 100 and 160 grams. Its body measures between 15 and 17 centimetres in length. The possum's tail is almost as long as its body. The Leadbeater's Possum is greyish brown. It has a distinctive black stripe along its back.



Leadbeater's Possums

Life cycle

Leadbeater's Possum may live for up to twelve years in a protected environment. Female possums can give birth twice a year.



Shelter and habitat

Leadbeater's Possums need a cool, damp, forested habitat with mature trees and brushy undergrowth. These possums live mainly in Mountain Ash, Alpine Ash and Shining Gum trees. These forests provide a vital source of food as well as shelter for the possums.

Leadbeater's Possums make their nests in very large trees that are up to 200 years old. They spend up to 16 hours a day sleeping in their nests of shredded bark.

Leadbeater's Possum will only nest in very old trees.



Food and feeding habits

Leadbeater's Possum is nocturnal. This means it feeds and is active during the night. The possums feed on:

- tree crickets
- other insects
- plant sap and gum.

Sap and gum from the plants provide the possums with up to 80 per cent of their energy intake. However, they still need to eat insects to ensure successful breeding.



A colony of Leadbeater's Possums may contain up to twelve animals. Usually, however, there is only one breeding pair among them. A Leadbeater's Possum stays with the same mate for its entire life.

Distribution

Leadbeater's Possum is confined to a relatively small area of Victoria. Most of the possums live in Mountain Ash and Alpine Ash forests in Victoria's central highlands. A small group of about 100 has survived in the lowland Mountain Swamp Gum forest in Yellingbo.



Distribution of Leadbeater's Possum

Threats

Habitat destruction from logging and land clearing is the main threat to the survival of Leadbeater's Possum. The clearing of **old-growth forest** has severely restricted its habitat. Threats from natural causes and human activity are listed below.

Natural causes

- bushfires
- Sooty and Powerful Owls

Human activity

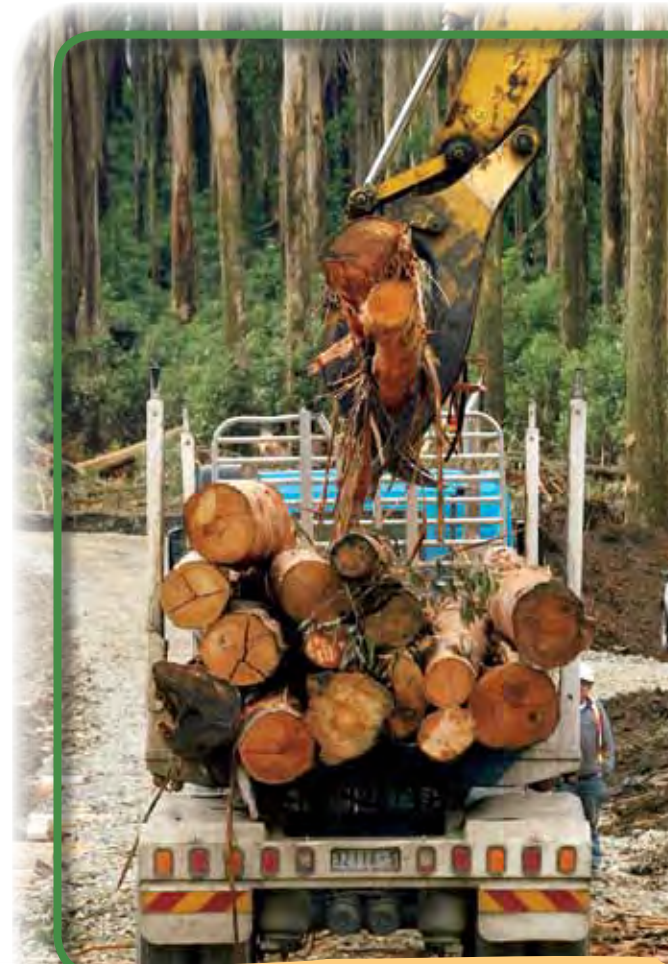
- logging
- land clearing
- feral cats
- introduced species, such as foxes

Bushfires

The habitat of Leadbeater's Possum is in an area at high risk of bushfire. Bushfires destroy the possum's habitat. They can also wipe out whole sections of the population.

Logging

Leadbeater's Possums make their home in old trees. Because of this, logging of old-growth forests poses a serious threat to their survival. The timber industry and conservationists need to work together. They must find ways for logging to occur without further damage to the Leadbeater's habitat. If such an agreement is not reached the possums will eventually stop breeding.



Logging old-growth forests destroys the habitat of Leadbeater's Possum.

Saving Leadbeater's Possum

The remaining Leadbeater's Possums live in the forests of Victoria's highlands. The harsh nature of this forest makes it hard to conduct studies. Researchers are studying the small group of possums in the Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve. This will help them find the best ways to help the possums survive. This group of possums may hold the key to saving the species.

Recovery plan

Aim

- To stabilise the current population of Leadbeater's Possums and prevent further losses.

Action

- Parks Victoria and the Threatened Species Network have funded research into the possums at Yellingbo. The government, the timber industry and other concerned groups have held talks. They are trying to make sure enough old-growth trees are saved for Leadbeater's Possum to survive. Sadly, the last Leadbeater's Possum in captivity in the world died at Toronto Zoo in 2010.

Future

- Researchers hope to establish another captive breeding program. However, this is not seen as a long-term solution. Captive breeding programs are only helpful if animals bred in captivity can be successfully released. Maintaining a population in the wild is the preferred option.



Volunteer groups are working to rebuild the possum's habitat in the Yellingbo Nature Conservation Reserve.

Internet resources

To read more about saving Leadbeater's Possum go to the following websites:

<http://www.australianfauna.com/leadbeaterspossum.php>

<http://australian-animals.net/lead.htm>

Further information

There are many other Australian mammals, apart from those mentioned in this book, whose survival is threatened. Each of the Australian states has compiled their own list of species at risk. If you would like more information on the wildlife in your state, look at the website listed below.

http://www.derm.qld.gov.au/wildlife-ecosystems/wildlife/threatened_plants_and_animals/endangered/endangered_animals/

<http://www.dec.wa.gov.au/content/view/5379/2231/>

<http://www.nt.gov.au/nreta/wildlife/animals/threatened/specieslist.html>



<http://www.denr.sa.gov.au/biodiversity/index.html>

<http://www.museum.vic.gov.au/bioinformatics/>

<http://www.parks.tas.gov.au/nature.html>

<http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/nationalparks/>

Glossary

captive breeding

providing a safe place in a zoo or sanctuary for animals to reproduce

carnivore

a meat-eating creature

conservation

looking after native plants and animals so they do not become endangered or extinct

den

an animal's sleeping place

DNA testing

scientific tests used to study genetic material

ecosystem

a group of plants and animals that interact with each other and their surroundings

endangered

likely to become extinct

extinct

no longer in existence

feral animals

domestic animals that have escaped into the wild

habitat

the environment in which an animal lives

herbivore

an animal that eats only plants

introduced species

a plant or animal that is not native to the country it lives in

marsupials

mammals, such as kangaroos and possums, which develop quickly in the uterus and usually have a pouch

native

belonging to a particular place or country

old-growth forest

a forested area that contains trees more than 120 years old

pollution

waste, usually from human activities, that dirties the environment

predators

animals that hunt other animals

protected environment

a place where animals are kept safe from threats, such as a sanctuary or national park

range

the area in which an animal lives

reproduce

to have babies

species

a specific breed of animal or plant

urban development

building new towns and cities

uterus

the place inside an animal where babies develop

vulnerable

likely to become endangered

warm-blooded

having a body temperature that is always warm, no matter what the temperature is outside