

# 12. Gliders and possums

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## 1 TAXONOMY, DISTRIBUTION AND BIOLOGY

There are 28 species of Australian possums and gliders in six Families. The smallest have an adult body size of less than 10 g while the largest may weigh up to around 4.5 kg (Smith & Winter 1984). All gliders and nearly all possums are arboreal and live in forest or heathland, but some are semi-terrestrial including the mountain pygmy possum (*Burramys parvus*), rock-haunting ringtail (*Petroseudes dahli*) and scaly-tailed possum (*Wyulda squamicaudata*) (Strahan 1995). Due to this habitat requirement, most species are found along the coast and associated ranges. Only a small number of species are found in Tasmania. Many species have a restricted range but some, such as the common brushtail (*Trichosurus vulpecula*), common ringtail (*Pseudocheirus peregrinus*) and sugar glider (*Petaurus breviceps*) have extensive ranges (Smith & Winter 1984). In addition, common brushtails and common ringtails often live in urban areas (How & Kerle 1995; McKay & Ong 1995). These two species are the most common seen in veterinary practice in Australia. Sugar gliders are commonly kept as pets in other countries and the common brushtail was introduced to New Zealand in 1858; it is now a major agricultural and ecological pest there (Tyndale-Biscoe 2005a).

Possums and gliders are nocturnal although some, such as the common spotted cuscus (*Spilocuscus maculatus*), the feather-tailed glider (*Acrobates pygmaeus*), the honey possum (*Tarsipes rostratus*) and the eastern pygmy possum (*Cercatetus nanus*), may sometimes be active in daylight hours (Renfree 1995; Turner & Ward 1995;

Winter & Leung 1995; Woodside 1995). During the day they shelter in constructed nests or pre-existing structures such as tree hollows or rocky outcrops (Menkhorst 1984). Common ringtail and feather-tailed glider nests are known as dreys. These are spherical bark or leaf nests made in tree hollows or suspended in undergrowth (McKay & Ong 1995; Woodside 1995). The basic social unit of possums and gliders may consist of an individual or stable, often family-based group depending on species (Russell et al. 1989). All possums and gliders have cutaneous scent glands and para-cloacal glands that are

**Table 12.1** Body weights of selected possum and glider species

Common name	Weight
Mountain pygmy possum	30–80 g
Eastern pygmy possum	15–38 g
Striped possum	245–520 g
Leadbeater's possum	100–160 g
Yellow-bellied glider	450–700 g
Sugar glider	90–150 g
Squirrel glider	190–300 g
Greater glider	900–1700 g
Herbert River ringtail possum	800–1500 g
Common ringtail	660–900 g
Honey possum	5–10 g
Feather-tailed glider	10–14 g
Mountain brushtail	2.5–4.5 kg
Common brushtail	1.5–4.0 kg
Scaly-tailed possum	1.3–2.0 kg

Source: Menkhorst (2001).