

Wildlife in the Roof

What's in my roof?

If there's something moving around in the ceiling it will make different sounds depending on its size, what it is doing, and how it walks. Rats (weighing no more than a few hundred grams) tend to scurry when they move, while brushtail possums (weighing up to five kilograms) will thump about in the roof even when they are walking slowly. Rats also need to keep their continually growing front teeth chisel-sharp and will gnaw loudly on anything they find (they can even carry old bones into roof and wall cavities to maintain their teeth). If you hear noises in the wall cavity of your home, it is most likely to be a rat.

If there's more than one animal in your roof they are likely to be either fighting over the territory or mating. In either case, the noise made will help you to guess the size of the animal. Rats and possums will both squeal when fighting (or mating), with the rat's squeal being higher pitched.

A resident male brushtail possum will also make a loud throaty call to warn other males that are within its home range.

Possums in the roof

Due to urban development there are no longer lots of old trees with suitable hollows for the possums to live in. The closest thing they can find is our roofs. They do not generally cause any problems living there except that they can be noisy on their way in and out. They may also bring leaf litter into the roof and urinate in a favourite spot.

It is illegal to trap possums in Queensland unless you have been granted a permit to do so. If a permit is granted to remove the possum it must then be released within 25m of where it was found. Possums are very territorial and if they are removed from their territory they will not survive (they get attacked by dogs or slowly starve). If a possum is removed from its territory then another will move in very quickly.

What can I do to remove a possum from my roof?

First, find the entry point. A simple way to find out whether an opening into the roof cavity of your home is being used by a possum is to loosely scrunch up a few sheets of newspaper and push them into any holes you find. If a possum is using it as an entry point into your roof, it will push them out when it emerges at dusk, thus showing you its access point. This process may have to be repeated after a possum has been removed and an entrance is sealed off, as a possum may be using a number of entry points. Any vegetation overhanging the roof should also be trimmed back at the same time to remove access to other possible entry points.

After an opening has been found it can be sealed off, making sure the possum isn't trapped inside. To avoid having to do the repair work at night it is possible to cover the entrance with a one-way exit that will allow the possum to leave, but stop it from getting back in. Cutting the bottom out of a heavy duty garbage bag and taping the bag over the exit point will allow the possum to push through it when it

emerges but this will create a barrier that stops it from re-entering. If the holes are being covered with wire mesh, the mesh can initially be attached on one side of the opening so that it can be pushed open by a possum as it leaves but springs back into place to stop the possum re-entering (the mesh can be held open with crumpled newspaper that will be pushed out when the possum leaves). Once certain that the possum is out of the roof, the other side of the mesh can be sealed off to block the entrance. Splashing strong smelling substances like disinfectant, or spraying quassia chip solution around the sealed off entrance will mask the possum's scent and discourage a possum from trying to get back in.

Blocking the possum's entry to the roof should be done in conjunction with erecting a nesting box nearby to give the possum a chance to find alternative shelter.



Can't the RSPCA just come and get it?

Possums are protected wildlife and their removal can only be carried out by licensed commercial possum relocators (relocators can be found in the Yellow Pages under 'Possum removal'). The RSPCA cannot recommend particular companies.

Having a possum removed is not a 'quick fix'. If the vacated den site is not sealed off it will simply be reoccupied. Relocators usually block off any access points then set a cage trap in the ceiling to remove the possum from the roof and release it outside. You may also want to put up a nest box to provide a new home for the possum and discourage it from returning to the roof. Ask the possum relocator to seal off all the entry points to your roof space and install a nest box while they are there.

Relocators must release possums within 25 metres of the point of capture to ensure that an animal is not released into another possum's home range. Possums are less likely to survive if they are released into a new area where they do not have access to a den or must compete with a neighbouring possum for den space.

Resources

http://www.ehp.qld.gov.au/wildlife/livingwith/brushtail_possums.html