



LEADBEATER'S POSSUM: HOW TO SAVE A VICTORIAN TREASURE

Leadbeater's Possum, also known as the Fairy Possum, is a nationally and globally endangered species found only in Victoria, and is one of the state's faunal emblems.

In January 2014 the conservation status of Leadbeater's Possum was reassessed under federal environmental laws. As a result it is now listed as critically endangered, the last listing before extinction in the wild.

The combination of large bushfires and decades of clearfell native forest logging have resulted in a decline in suitable possum habitat and increased the risk of extinction.

New research has added to our understanding of what is needed to save Leadbeater's, and the threats it faces:

- There have been significant losses of large old (hollow-bearing) trees the possum needs for nesting.
- Stands of old growth forest, which support the highest abundance of hollow-bearing trees, are a tiny fraction – 1.6 to 3.3% – of what they were at the time of white settlement in Victoria. These forests have been severely degraded through logging (including the deliberate conversion of old growth forest into regrowth), 40 years of intensive clearfelling, and repeated wildfires (Lindenmayer et al. 2012a).
- Leadbeater's Possum is absent from sites burned in the 2009 bushfires and the abundance of the species is significantly depressed on unburned sites where the surrounding landscape has been burned.
- Extensive fires in 2009 damaged almost half the known habitat of Leadbeater's Possum and the

species appears to be on an extinction trajectory. Populations have been lost from areas such as the Lake Mountain region.

Available scientific information clearly indicates new strategies based on the best and most up-to-date science are urgently required, including expanding national park protection in the Central Highlands.

An expanded reserve area would need to see revised estimates of areas available for logging.

Virtually all of the Montane Ash Forest in Victoria's Central Highlands is managed by state government agencies and owned by the people of Victoria. Preventing the extinction of Leadbeater's Possum in the wild is clearly a Victorian Government responsibility.

BUILDING A GREEN EDGE FOR MELBOURNE

To help save Leadbeater's Possum from extinction and protect Victoria's Mountain Ash forests from catastrophic collapse we need increased national parks protection in the Central Highlands and Yarra Ranges.

References

Lindenmayer D. B., Blanchard W., McBurney L., Blair D., Banks S., Likens G. E., Franklin J. F., Laurance W. F., Stein J. A. R. & Gibbons P. (2012) Interacting Factors Driving a Major Loss of Large Trees with Cavities in a Forest Ecosystem. PLOS ONE 7(10), e41864

LEADBEATER'S POSSUM

Leadbeater's Possum was first discovered in the 1860s, but only six specimens were collected until 1909 and the species was not seen again for more than 50 years.

It was presumed extinct. But then it was rediscovered in 1961, about 10km from Marysville – one of the towns devastated in the 2009 Black Saturday wildfires. The species is virtually confined to the wet ash forests in a 60x80km area known as the Central Highlands of Victoria.

It has one of the most restricted distributions of any Australian mammal.

Leadbeater's Possum is a very special part of the psyche of Victorians and one of the state's faunal emblems.



Photo: Steve Kuitert