

## Possum Pieces #2 – Are brushtails easier than ringtails?

Conventional wisdom says that brushtail possums are easier to raise than ringtails but it's not really as simple as that. Both species have their difficulties and their positives. Brushtails can certainly be raised from a much earlier stage of development. Assuming there are no other complications, eyes closed, ears up, and just the hint of fur under the skin is viable for a brushtail, but you would not attempt to raise a



ringtail from this stage. Brushtails are a bit more robust in terms of diet. They eat a wider range of leaf varieties and can be supplemented with small amounts of fruit and vegetables, sprouted seeds or almonds – but not every night. Brushtails are also a little hardier when it comes to gut problems. They do sometimes get yeast or bacterial infections but they have a much better recovery rate than ringtails. The main reason for this is their more varied diet. Specialist eucalypt feeders like ringtails have a more delicately balanced gut flora and are extremely sensitive to antibiotics.

There are two main problems with brushtails. First, they can be difficult feeders, particularly at the early backriding stage. It may be necessary to try bottles and teats, syringes, and cannulas before finding a system that works for that brushtail. Getting them to lap can also be a nightmare. The second problem is that brushtails are more likely to become humanised. For this reason, some carers raise brushtails in pairs (a topic discussed in another Possum Piece). New carers in particular are likely to fall into this trap, and they are the ones most likely to be given a brushtail joey.

So, overall, do I think brushtails are easier? Probably, except for the feeding issue. Even very experienced carers will struggle to get some problem brushtail joeys feeding. For this reason, if new carers are to be given a brushtail as their first possum a mentor or senior carer should make sure the joey is not one of those problem kids before handing it over.

That leaves the question, are ringtails really that much more difficult? Again, it depends on a number of variables. There are certain types of injuries that ringtail possums seem to struggle to survive. These include cat attacks and attacks by native birds such as butcher birds. Animals with these injuries need to be carefully assessed by an experienced possum vet. Many of these animals are, and rightly so,

euthanased. Ringtails are also less likely than brushtails to come back from severe dehydration. But, after many years of caring, I would take a healthy ringtail over a healthy brushtail any day!

To start with, baby ringtails take to a syringe like the proverbial duck to water. They also learn to lap far more quickly than brushtails. Ringtail possums really do like to be in a crèche. A struggling lone ringtail will make remarkable gains when put with others its own size. They learn to lap milk, eat leaf and self-toilet from others in the crèche.



The key to successfully raising ringtails is to follow the rules quite strictly. There are no shortcuts with ringtails. Hygiene has to be exemplary. Four hourly feeds means four hourly feeds. No supplements means just that – a diet of milk and then leaf, and nothing else. In addition, a high proportion of that leaf needs to be eucalyptus species. The adult ringtail possum gut is highly specialised to digest the eucalypts, much like the koala. Ringtail possums are coprophagic, which means they re-ingest soft faeces passed during the day. Very young ringtails that come into care before they have started to eat leaf in the wild may need to have their gut flora seeded with faeces from a healthy adult. This process is referred to as papping the youngster and would occur naturally in the wild. Bloat can be a problem for hand-raised possums and it is usually fatal in ringtails. The main cause of bloat is an upset of the gut bacteria, with too many of one type and not enough of another. One of the biggest mistakes some carers make is to feed fruit to ringtails. The sugars in these fruits feed the bad bacteria that then multiply at the expense of good bacteria. Sticking to strict feeding rules will help minimise problems such as bloat.

Sticking to the food rules for ringtails includes cutting adequate amounts of the right types of leaf. This is probably the most difficult part in terms of time. The best place to find the right leaf for ringtails is to go bush, which means a reasonable drive for urban carers. Not only is it necessary to find the right types of leaf, it also has to be fresh. In the cooler months a couple of days' worth of leaf can be kept in a large bucket but in the middle of summer fresh leaf needs to be cut every day. No matter how sick the carer feels or how bad the weather is, a carer who commits to caring for ringtails, commits to cutting leaf.

Despite the problems associated with raising ringtails, they are still my favourite and I don't find them too difficult. I accept when vets say an injured baby needs to be euthanased, no matter how much I want to try to save it. I follow the food rules without wavering even once. Now that I am retired, I have time to cut leaf every day and have turned the half hour drive out bush into a joy to be in nature rather than a chore.