

Possum Pieces #3 – Pairing brushtail possum joeys

It is common practice to raise ringtail possums in a crèche, but what about brushtails? What is the optimum group size for raising brushtails? There are many who advocate raising brushtails on their own. This view comes from the relatively solitary, some might say anti-social, life of brushtails and the fact that they usually give birth to a single joey. There are, however, some legitimate reasons for pairing



brushtails when they are hand-raised. Hand-raised brushtail possums can become humanised, and raising them with one of their own species can go some way to reducing this impact. There is also a good argument for hand-raised animals meeting others of their own species before being released into the wild. This is particularly pertinent for pinkies.

While there are good reasons for raising brushtails in pairs, there can also be problems. First is the strong instinct to backride, particularly if the joeys are paired after pouch emergence when they have been riding on mum's back in the wild. Second, a hungry joey will look for a teat and, in the absence of a real teat, their buddy's toe, ear or scrotum is worth a try. I have seen some pretty nasty wounds from sucking that has been let go for some time. Backriding, inappropriate sucking and general grumpiness can lead to fighting between the joeys. Left unchecked both joeys will become stressed and the likelihood of illness increases. A stressed baby will not thrive. It is also important not to raise two males together. They may get on fine while in care, but releasing two males together is likely to cause problems when they are looking for their own space in the wild.

Problems need to be addressed immediately, but there are strategies that can minimise the chances of problems occurring in the first place. First and foremost is that pairing should be done when the joeys are very young. Pouch young will pair up without too many problems as long as they are unstressed and well fed. Yeast and bacterial infections are reasonably common in hand-raised pinkies so experienced carers put each baby in its own liner and then put them together in an outer pouch. This means the babies are getting used to the

smell and movement of a buddy while minimising cross-contamination should illness occur. The second key to success when pairing joeys is to make sure they are at the same stage of development. This is not the same as having joeys of the same weight. Paired pinkies should open their eyes on almost the same day. A seal-fur or slinky baby should not be paired with a fluffy one. A pouch emergent joey should not be paired with a backrider.



Mismatching the stage of development invites problems of backriding and inappropriate sucking.

The smaller the joeys, the easier it is to introduce them. Whenever a new possum comes in to care there should be a period of quarantine. Following quarantine, there are several strategies for easing the pairing of brushtail joeys and reducing problems or stress. I make sure the babies are settled and

feeding well and then put them in separate liners within the same pouch. At the same time, I have them both out in my hands for a short time after each feed. Often, the joeys will crawl out of their pouch liners, find each other and curl up together in the outer pouch. If they do not find each other, the next step is to put them together in the same liner after a few days. Leave the pouch open in case one needs to escape and have plenty of fluffy blankets in the basket so the escapee has somewhere safe to settle down. I always have a second sleeping option for paired brushtails no matter how well they are getting on at the start. When brushtail joeys are raised together there will be some hissing at each other right through to the point of release. As long as it is just the odd hiss and not constant fighting I think this is a good thing. Brushtail possums hiss at each other in the wild so I see this as learning a normal wild brushtail behaviour.

Having a possum-sized fluffy toy in the cage until the joeys are over about 500g is another key element of success. It goes some way to stopping them from clinging to each other. There is usually one who is a little more clingy than the other and at night it is not unusual to see one climbing the rafters and the other clinging contentedly to the fluffy toy. Sometimes, in the morning, one or both joeys may be sound asleep snuggled up to the toy rather than sleeping in the pouch. If one consistently wants to sleep with the toy rather

than their possum buddy there may be some squabbles in the pouch and introducing the toy-snuggler to its own pouch may be required.

Adult brushtail possums do tend to be loners so as the joeys approach independence it is important that they are housed in a really big aviary – the bigger the better. I would not house a pair of pre-release brushtail possums in a space smaller than about 2x5m. While they may sleep together during the day they spend a lot of time apart during the night. I also provide two sleeping options and two pots of leaf. Little babies love the company of a friend but we are raising them for release into the wild which, for brushtail possums, is reasonably solitary. If given the space, the instinct to put distance between themselves and other possums will kick in automatically.

If significant problems do occur it is important to separate the joeys straight away to avoid further stress. I have a range of strategies for remediating a difficult introduction. If the babies are still pouch bound simply putting them into their own liners and securing the tops allows a longer period of getting to know the smell of the buddy without physical contact. Older joeys will want to come out of the pouch from time to time and they may need to be placed in separate baskets, close together with a single towel or blanket over the two baskets.

One of the two females in the picture below came into care under very stressful conditions and was a chronic backrider for a long time. The girls were raised in separate baskets and then in adjoining small aviaries until they were past the backriding stage. Because they had full visual contact and limited physical contact through wire, they knew each other well enough to go together in the large aviary quite happily after weaning when they were feeling confident and independent.

In summary, while pairing brushtail joeys can be problematic and is not always possible, I believe that brushtails raised in pairs are more confident and less humanised than brushtails raised on their own. When I do have to raise a brushtail on its own I make sure it at least has visual contact with other brushtails.

