



Monday 6 May 2019

Ground-breaking research finds new Leadbeater's possum areas

New published research has found Victoria's Leadbeater's possums living beyond the areas and mix of tree species so far considered their limited habitat.

VicForests and Ecology and Heritage Partners have located six new Leadbeater's possum colonies in the Central Highlands.

VicForests' and Ecology and Heritage Partners' initial observation of the possums was in forest severely affected by 2006-07 fires about 3.5 kilometres outside the previous distribution range. Overall, Leadbeater's possums were observed 34 times through 1427 camera-trap nights and 62 hours of spotlight surveying.

From the six independent sites with Leadbeater's possum observations, half were in mixed species forests, despite the prevailing belief is that the possum primarily lives in Ash forests. This suggests that mixed species forests may be undervalued in providing potential habitat to Leadbeater's possums.

Considerable resources have been focused on Leadbeater's possum surveys which are conducted only in Ash type forests.

They have also been detected in forest recently affected by fire; despite the current understanding that the species generally do not occupy habitat in areas recently affected by fire.

Half the sites were found in relatively young Ash-dominant forest, harvested as recently as 40 years ago, which is contrary to current thinking that they live only in very old Ash trees.

VicForests' research has been corroborated by recent separate University of Melbourne research, which also found similar sightings up to 15 kilometres from their previously known distribution range.

The possum is thought to roam 1 to 2 kilometres from its home tree, suggesting the colonies have not travelled to these unexpected homes but have always lived there.

VicForests General Manager of Corporate Affairs, Alex Messina, said the discovery contributed important new information about the range and ecology of this iconic species.

"This discovery demands more research and is not cause for complacency," Mr Messina said. "What makes it exciting is the suggestion that they may be wider-spread and more resilient than previously thought.

"We have identified possums living in a mix of tree species as far out as 14.2 kilometres from their known territory and in young forest that was burnt in the 2006-07 fires.

A photograph of a forest landscape with tall trees and green foliage, partially obscured by a green geometric shape in the top right corner.

“This confirms that the species can persist in fire refuges during and immediately after fire, or they are returning to regenerating forest much earlier than first thought.

Until 2014, it was widely thought that populations of the critically endangered possum was between 1,000 and 2,000. Following recent research, the Threatened Species Scientific Committee has cautiously estimated that the population may in fact be between 2,500 and 10,000 individuals. You can read the Threatened Species Scientific Committee consultation document [here](#).

To date, six per cent of the possum’s known territory has been surveyed.

“VicForests supports continued measures to research and protect the Leadbeater’s possum to ensure its long-term future,” Mr Messina said.

VicForests thanks all organisations and scientists who contributed to this research and supports future collaboration to accurately assess Leadbeater’s Possum distribution.

This research, *Range extension of Leadbeater's possum (Gymnobelideus leadbeateri)*, has been accepted, peer-reviewed and published by CSIRO Publishing’s *Australian Mammalogy*. A copy of this research is available at <https://www.publish.csiro.au/AM/AM18025>.

ENDS

Background:

- There is 7.1 million hectares of public forests across Victoria, about 94 per cent of which is protected in parks, reserves or is unsuitable for native timber harvesting.
- VicForests harvests around 3000 hectares per year, or 0.04 per cent of that area – nominally equivalent to 4 trees in 10,000.
- VicForests is certified under the Responsible Wood certification.
- High Conservation Values (HCVs) are protected through rigorous conservation practices including exclusion zones for threatened species and buffer zones to prevent encroachment on rainforest areas.
- VicForests protects any Leadbeater Possum or colonies through a 12.6-hectare Timber Harvest Exclusion Zone, equivalent to about 6 MCG fields. This protection has been consulted and agreed upon with a wide range of independent scientists, regulators and environment groups.
- VicForests also applies Greater Gliders protection zones, throughout East Gippsland, of 100 hectares in areas where more than 10 Gliders are found in a one-kilometre line.
- VicForests is committed to the highest standard of regeneration. VicForests replants all the areas that are harvested, replanting areas with the same trees that were there previously.