

10 March 2016

Hundreds of new Leadbeater's Possum colonies discovered

More than 200 new colonies of the critically endangered Leadbeater's Possum have been discovered in forests north-east of Melbourne.

There have been 218 new Possum colonies verified since February 2015 following surveys conducted by the Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning, Arthur Rylah Institute (ARI), VicForests, Parks Victoria, Zoos Victoria and the community, including four detections verified in the past week.

Typically colonies are made up of two or three individuals but can be home to as many as 12 possums.

Of the colonies detected, 164 were identified in State Forest and immediately protected from timber harvesting operations.

VicForests' General Manager, Planning, Nathan Trushell said "When a colony is detected in forest available for timber harvesting, the site is protected through the application of a 12 hectare timber harvesting exclusion zone.

"Colonies are understood to live within a one to three hectare area and the size of the area excluded from harvesting has been extended to 12 hectares as a precautionary measure."

"Almost 70 per cent of potential habitat for the Possum is already protected in National Parks and reserves or is unavailable for timber harvesting, and the creation of these exclusion zones around colonies is another measure being used to help the Possum recover from the impact of the 2009 Black Saturday fires," he said.

From 1983 to 2010, there were just 20 colony detections per year. However, increased survey efforts and the use of technology such as motion sensor cameras and an increased survey effort has led to 218 colony detections being verified in just over 12 months.

Mr Trushell said some Leadbeater's Possum colonies were detected in areas regrowing after being harvested in the 1980s and 1990s.

"This is a ground-breaking discovery because it had been unclear how quickly the Possum would use a site after timber harvesting takes place..

"These detections occurred in areas that were harvested just 20 or 30 years ago with the regrowing forest seemingly providing an excellent food source for the Possum," he said.

Leadbeater's Possums were also found living in tree hollows artificially created as part of a collaborative project between ARI and VicForests designed to provide additional habitat for the species while the forest grows old enough to form natural hollows. Possums have also been found using nest boxes.

Mr Trushell said that the discovery of the colonies is a great indication of how advances in technology are improving the number of species detected.

"Specialist arborists install heat and motion sensing cameras opposite bait stations within the tree canopy or tall understorey to detect the Leadbeater's Possum.

VicForests has also adopted an alternative method of harvesting for up to 50 per cent of the area harvested in Ash forest within the Leadbeater's range, known as Regrowth Retention Harvesting.

"We use this method as an alternative to clearfell harvesting as it retains additional areas of forest providing current and future habitat for the possum," Mr Trushell said.

Media Release



Notes:

www.vicforests.com.au/leadbeaters-possum

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