

When a sick possum showed up in my garden my heart overtook my head. Is it ever OK to feed urban wildlife?

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. Discuss the following questions in pairs.

- Do wild animals ever come into your garden or yard? Which ones?
- If you found an injured or sick wild animal, what would you do?
- What threat do you think domestic pets pose to native wild animal species, and what can pet owners do to minimise this threat?

2 Key words

a. Find these words and phrases in the article and then match them to the correct definitions.

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|-----------------------|---|
| 1. cardinal sin _____ | a. making a low, crackling noise as leaves or paper move against each other |
| 2. fine line _____ | b. behaviour that is regarded as an especially serious moral fault or mistake |
| 3. diligently _____ | c. to speed up an action or make something happen sooner |
| 4. divisive _____ | d. done with careful and continuous effort |
| 5. encroach on _____ | e. to intrude on physical space or a person's rights or time without permission |
| 6. endemic to _____ | f. expressed or carried out in a cautious or hesitant way |
| 7. hasten _____ | g. taking small, quick bites of food |
| 8. huffing _____ | h. whistling breathing sounds, often linked to illness or asthma |
| 9. intruder _____ | i. an unpleasant or prolonged experience that is difficult to endure |
| 10. nibbling _____ | j. made a long, loud, high-pitched sound, often in fear |
| 11. ordeal _____ | k. making short puffs of breath, often after physical effort |
| 12. pus _____ | l. skin eruptions or irritations, often red and itchy |
| 13. rashes _____ | |
| 14. rustling _____ | |
| 15. screeched _____ | |

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| 16. sound _____ | m. to signal disapproval with a click of the tongue |
| 17. tentatively _____ | n. a person who enters a place where they are not wanted or permitted |
| 18. thaw _____ | o. a clear distinction that is difficult to define precisely, often between two similar things |
| 19. tut tut _____ | p. fluid filled with bacteria and white blood cells, produced by infection |
| 20. wheezes _____ | q. causing strong disagreement between groups |
| | r. regularly found in a particular region or community |
| | s. to soften or melt after being frozen |
| | t. strong, reliable and free from error or weakness |

b. Complete the sentences with words from the previous activity in the correct form.

- You'll need to _____ the frozen chicken before you can cook it.
- The hedgehog slowly and _____ made its way into the garden in search of food.
- The workers' demands for higher pay proved highly _____ with some trade union leaders.
- I could hear my grandfather _____ as he climbed the stairs.
- Aiden's constant lateness to class is seen as a(n) _____ by his house master.
- The scandal only served to _____ the politician's resignation.
- Our crossing of the desert turned into a frightening _____ when a sandstorm approached.
- The children had been _____ on crisps and snacks all day, so they weren't hungry at dinner time.

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9. The woman _____ in pain as she was admitted to the maternity unit.
10. Children in tropical countries can be affected by diseases _____ their region.
11. As an asthma sufferer, I make sure I always have my medication to hand to prevent any _____ or shortness of breath.
12. A major new housing development is now _____ protected 'green belt' land on the outskirts of the city.
13. 'Your argument is generally _____,' admitted Briana's tutor, 'but you need to work on your understanding of the main characters a little more.'
14. A faint _____ in the bushes told us the fox was near.
15. Cody often _____ and rolls his eyes at his mum's repeated requests for him to tidy his room.
16. The police caught and arrested a(n) _____ who had broken into our garage.
17. Emily worked _____ to finish the report before the deadline.
18. After contact with cats, Chris noticed hot, red _____ spreading across his arms.
19. The dog's infected eye began to ooze _____.
20. There is often a(n) _____ between confidence and arrogance.

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While official advice is clear, it's not a black-and-white issue, experts say. Responsibly interacting with urban wildlife may increase our compassion

Phoebe Loomes

20 August, 2025

- 1 Chopping vegetables in my kitchen on a winter afternoon, I was startled by the sound of rustling branches and loud coughing coming from my back yard. I walked outside tentatively, prepared to face an intruder. Instead, after a few minutes of listening to evenly timed wheezes, I spotted it – a small brushtail possum, tucked behind lilly-pilly branches bowing over my fence.
- 2 Through the leaves, two black eyes peered desperately into the afternoon sun, eyelids dotted with pus. Its pink nose was swollen and its body and limbs were a patchwork of rashes, with pieces of fur missing across its body. Huffing and bloodied, the possum looked like a once-loved teddy bear – greying, losing its stuffing and left to decay in the garden.
- 3 My bleeding heart took over my head and I dashed inside and grabbed a bag of frozen berries, dumping a handful in a glass of water to thaw before wandering out and dropping a few wet fruits on the fence. Over the afternoon I watched the sick possum pick up berries, nibbling while purple juice dripped off its chin. As the sun set it put its head into its chest, wheezing itself to sleep.
- 4 Feeding native wildlife is a divisive topic. While some throw mince to kookaburras with wild abandon, others tut tut, insisting it's best to let them fend for themselves. I called the wildlife rescue organisation Wires, which advised us to capture the possum so it could receive veterinary care. As my husband slowly approached with an old bath towel, in a scene not dissimilar from the 1931 film *Dracula*, the possum suddenly reanimated, screeched loudly then scampered into the night.
- 5 Despite its terror it was clearly tempted by the prospect of more thawed-out berries because a few days later it returned. But I was not keen on trying to catch the possum again. After seeing it thrash around in fear, I worried that the stress of the ordeal might actually hasten its death. Diligently, and against best advice, I began leaving food for it. Providing slices of apple and carrot seemed like a neighbourly thing to do. But regular offerings might harm an animal more than they help.
- 6 Brushtail possums in a natural environment eat native shrubs, plants and leaves. This is why a professor of behavioural ecology at the University of Sydney, Clare McArthur, says feeding brushtail possums should largely be avoided: "What are we doing to their gut flora? How good is [the food] we're feeding them? "If they become reliant on us, what happens when we go away?"
- 7 John Grant from Wires says feeding poses other risks, too. "They can also become 'humanised' and lose their natural fear of potential predators including domestic pets," he says. "Possums (and native birds) are best fed with native foliage, so planting native trees and shrubs endemic to your area helps provide them with a natural food source."
- 8 Male possums being routinely fed can also become stressed when other males, keen for an opportunistic meal, encroach on their territory, which they naturally want to defend, according to a Taronga veterinary nurse, Annii Downing.
- 9 McArthur says giving a brushtail the odd piece of healthy food might not be a cardinal sin. "Now and then, it would be OK, because one of the virtues is that we start to value the wildlife around us. So it's not a yes or no thing. It's a fine line."
- 10 While official advice on wild animal feeding is generally negative, Prof emeritus Darryl Jones from Griffith University agrees that responsibly interacting with urban wildlife can increase people's compassion for animals. "No wild animals in Australia need extra food," Jones says. "The reality is, millions of people every single day are feeding birds, and can't find any information."
- 11 Compelled to counter this information void with facts, the behavioural ecologist, bird feeder and author of 10 books wrote a popular Australian field guide to urban birds, *Feeding the Birds at Your Table*. "If you Google 'What should I feed my magpies' you'll get inundated with huge amounts of negativity," he says. "That's my thing ... to reconnect people with nature. "Only when people care about, look for, observe and just try and understand the wildlife around us will they care enough to protect them. "That's the big philosophical side to this."
- 12 Just under a year on, I still see the possum on our fence. Its wounds have healed, it no longer wheezes or wobbles. Instead it has taken to chewing my veggie patch, eating rainbow chard and parsley every few days. While I used to enjoy my own harvest, I now laugh at what the picky possum has chosen and wonder why it doesn't like lemon thyme.

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Some nights, it seems as though there's been a possum party. I wake to lilly-pilly fruits across our concrete back yard.

- 13 And every so often my husband still leaves out an apple slice for the possum. Even though we know we shouldn't. Philosophically, though, I think it is sound.

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3 Comprehension check

a. Read the article and choose True or False. Correct the false statements.

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| 1. The author was preparing a meal when she first heard the possum. | True / False |
| 2. The possum initially refused to eat any of the food that the author gave it. | True / False |
| 3. The organisation Wires suggested the author catch the possum so it could get professional treatment. | True / False |
| 4. Professor McArthur argues that it is unwise to feed brushtail possums because they get used to being fed. | True / False |
| 5. According to John Grant, possums who are given food become even more wary of domestic animals. | True / False |
| 6. The possum successfully escaped when the husband tried to capture it with a bath towel. | True / False |
| 7. After a year, the possum didn't appear to have suffered any ill effects. | True / False |
| 8. The author and her husband decided to cease feeding the possum on moral grounds. | True / False |

4 Key language

a. Find these phrasal verbs in the article. Then match them to the correct definition.

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 1. thrash around _____ | a. to be dependent on someone or something for support or survival |
| 2. fend for (themselves) _____ | b. to think that something or someone is important, and you are concerned about it |
| 3. scampered into _____ | c. having many small features, marks or objects spread across a surface |
| 4. dotted with _____ | d. to struggle or move wildly, often through fear or discomfort |
| 5. become reliant on _____ | |
| 6. care about _____ | |

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- e. to manage to survive or cope independently, especially without help
- f. moved quickly and lightly, often in a playful or nervous way, into a place

b. Complete the sentences with the correct form of the expressions from the previous activity.

1. The young deer _____ the woodland when they heard the sound of an approaching vehicle.
2. The Alpine mountainside was _____ bright wildflowers in early spring.
3. Terrified by sudden loud noise, the horse began to _____ in fear.
4. As a mature student living abroad, Wanda had to _____ herself without any family support.
5. Geoff _____ his car to get to work every day as there are limited public transport links in his village.
6. We should _____ our environment more because it affects us all.

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these questions.

- Do you think the author made the right decision by continuing to feed the possum? Why or why not?
- How should we balance showing compassion for animals with following expert advice?
- Do you think it's morally acceptable to try to domesticate urban wildlife? Why or why not?

6 In your own words

- a. Work in small groups to create a two-column chart, listing arguments FOR and AGAINST feeding urban wildlife, using specific quotes and arguments from the article.
- b. Write a paragraph stating which position you agree with. Then present your ideas to the class. Decide whose ideas you think are the most convincing.