

Media Release

The Hon Lily D'Ambrosio MP

Minister for Energy, the Environment and Climate Change
Minister for Solar Homes



Tuesday, 21 June 2022

BREAKTHROUGH FOR CRITICALLY ENDANGERED LEADBEATERS POSSUM

For the first time in more than 20 years the critically endangered Leadbeater's Possum has been born in captivity, thanks to support from the Andrews Labor Government's investment in Victoria's faunal emblems.

Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change Lily D'Ambrosio today announced the arrival of two Highland Leadbeater's Possum joeys born at Healesville Sanctuary, a breeding breakthrough due to diet and animal husbandry changes.

This breakthrough provides hope for the long-term goal of also successfully breeding Lowland Leadbeater's Possums, of which fewer than 30 remain in the world. Comparatively, highland populations have declined to only a few thousand possums.

Since the Leadbeater's Possum Captive Breeding Program restarted in 2012, keepers have been trying to crack the code for breeding by closely reviewing husbandry practices and the complex dietary needs of this enchanting, nocturnal mammal.

A leading zoo and wildlife nutritionist, veterinarians, and marsupial reproductive experts are accounting the breakthrough to a new diet, which has seen positive changes to the possums' gut microbiome and reproductive health, with an increase in sperm production in the males.

The possums' diet is a honey-based nectar which the experts have loaded with increased fibre and balanced with essential vitamins and minerals.

The Leadbeater's Possum was successfully bred in captivity during the 1990s, however the program ended due to ageing animals, limited genetics, and no requirements for wild release at the time.

One of the newborn Highland Leadbeater's Possums today underwent its first health check at Healesville Sanctuary's Australian Wildlife Health Centre today and was confirmed to be male. The joey checked last month was confirmed to be female and weighed 97 grams.

Alongside the Helmeted Honeyeater, the Leadbeater's Possum is one of the two Victorian faunal emblems with the Labor Government contributing \$2 million via the Faunal Emblems Program. Since 2018, almost \$4 million in funding has been dedicated to improving the long-term sustainability of both species.

The Government has invested more than \$305 million in Zoos Victoria since 2014. Over the same period, the Government has invested more than \$560 million into protecting biodiversity – more than any other in Victorian history – working to halt the decline of Victoria's plants and animals through the landmark plan *Biodiversity 2037*.

Quote attributable to Minister for Energy, Environment and Climate Change Lily D'Ambrosio

"We're excited to welcome these two precious possums and to see the success of our ongoing investment into our state's faunal emblem and the unique biodiversity of Victoria."

Quote attributable to Zoos Victoria Life Sciences Manager Conservation & Research, Monika Zabinkas

"This breeding success with Highlands Leadbeater's Possums has shown us that the dietary and husbandry changes we have made are working and gives us hope that we could breed Lowlands Leadbeater's in the future."

Media contact: Lily King 0432 279 396 | lily.king@minstaff.vic.gov.au