

(Imagined)
field notes:

Overhead, in the communal crown — could it be, quite unlikely — a critically endangered Leadbeater's possum (*Gymnobelideus leadbeateri*)? The canopy overhead, so high, we cannot fully see, and below the surface, the roots which hold the tree in place, we cannot see those either. So much is beyond our sight, and so much, too, is beyond our comprehension. With heads tipped back, we grow dizzy. We lumbersome, two. We operate in a different time, and this is keenly felt.

You and the tree in your backyard come from a common ancestor. A billion and a half years ago, the two of you parted ways. But even now, after an immense journey in separate directions, that tree and you still share a quarter of your genes ... (Richard Powers, *The Overstory*¹, p.268)

The tree, from which one can be out of or up, treelike or treed, is a refuge. And today, it is a refuge for a Leadbeater's possum, of which it is estimated that there are fewer than 40² left in the wild. The reason: threatened by

edition of Cronin's *Key Guide to Australian Mammals*, we glean, the Leadbeater's possum favours a diet of beetles, spiders, crickets and other insects⁴ which he or she can tease out from beneath the ribbons of hanging and fallen bark. They favour the protection of a dense understorey of wattle to provide all important connectivity which enables them to navigate with ease, foraging for food without being predated upon, themselves, by owls. They favour tall, open, montane forests in which to den in hollows; Mountain ash

join the Leadbeater with Mountain ash, with direct observation, to read the wider whole. Between the documented facts and the act of looking and interpreting, a whole world opens and grows.

The Leadbeater's possum and the trees seem indivisible to us — the health of one indicative of the health of the whole — “saying things, in words before words” (Richard Powers, *The Overstory*, p.3).

Our gardens get smaller as we build to the boundary line. No room

Additional sources:

Mounted Male and Female Leadbeater's possum (*Gymnobelideus leadbeateri*) specimens in the collection of Museums Victoria collection. Collected by Frederick McCoy, Bass River, Victoria, 1867. Not on display; currently in storage. Photographed by Heath Warwick. <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/specimens/132186>. <https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/specimens/1835129>.

Endnotes:

1 World Book Night (WBN) United Artists invited participants to read *The Overstory* by Richard Powers and make a piece of work in response to the book for an exhibition and mail art swap.

2 'Local threatened species: Leadbeater's Possum (Lowland population)', Zoos

Victoria: Fighting Extinction, <https://www.zoo.org.au/fighting-extinction/local-threatened-species/leadbeaters-possum-lowland-population>, accessed 20th March, 2025.

3 'The evolution of the 'naked dart': Leadbeater's possum evolved up to 20 million years ago', Friends of Leadbeater's Possum website, <https://leadbeaters.org.au/about-leadbeaters-possum/history-of-leadbeaters-possum/>, accessed 20th March, 2025.

4 Leadbeater's possum (*Gymnobelideus leadbeateri*), Leonard Cronin, *Cronin's Key Guide to Australian Mammals* (Allen & Urwin: Crows Nest, NSW, 2024), p.69.

5 'Individual mountain ash trees can provide food and shelter to a range of birds, mammals, reptiles and invertebrates, species like the powerful owl or the endangered Leadbeater's



possum.

Mountain ash forests

are some of the greatest carbon sinks in the world, and Melbourne's water supply depends on the evapotranspiration of these trees.' *What the Trees See: A Wander Through Millennia of Natural History in Australia*, Monash University Publishing, Monash University, Clayton, 2023, pp. 172–173.

6 Mountain ash (*Eucalyptus regnans*), Leonard Cronin, *Cronin's Key Guide to Australian Trees* (Allen & Urwin: Crows Nest, NSW, 2024), p.149.

WORLD BOOK NIGHT 2025

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logging. Once presumed extinct, this arboreal marsupial wonderment was rediscovered, albeit hanging on by a thread, in 1961 (by Eric Wilkinson at Cambarville

and Tommy's Bend, near Marysville in the Central Highlands, on the 3rd April, 1961. The first Leadbeater's possum specimens were collected in the scrub, on the banks of the Bass River in Gippsland, Victoria, in 1867³).

Consulting our revised

(*Eucalyptus regnans*) forests⁵, above an elevation of 700m, in particular, but Alpine ash and Shining Gum trees will make equally fine accommodation.

WBN
2025
UNFOLD TO
READ ME

Guidebooks may list Diet, Habitat, Status, but they rely on the reader piecing it all together. No species being in isolation, but in the same breath, like a page in a guidebook on *Australian Mammals* that needs to be read in tandem with another guidebook on *Australian Trees*⁶. Together, we

for trees; let's build more. Our wild areas, too; let's take that. And this. We need more. Much more. And so, to counter this woe, this ache, this realisation, we join the choir of those, though from the human world of more, more, more, saying, look to the trees, to the wonderful trees, to the life they sustain, and the strength and wisdom of which we'll never fully comprehend. To trees. For trees. Because of trees. “Saying things, in words before words”, if you'll observe and listen.

