

Photographs

Photographing possums is a singularly difficult operation. Possums are nocturnal animals, they expand their pupils like cats do, but to a much greater degree: when fully dilated the pupil covers nearly the whole surface of the eye.

Photography, apart from infra-red, requires visible light, and possums are lucifugous.

If anyone doubts that a sudden increase in light causes actual physical pain, I suggest that they go outside one night somewhere dark, spend half an hour adjusting their eyes, then get someone to shine a strong torch full in their face. And bear in mind that human pupils do not dilate to anything like the extent that the pupils of animals whose eyes are designed for night vision do. It is not so much the actual intensity of the light - the same amount of light might be tolerable if steady, and gradual adjustment to it is allowed to take place - it is the sudden contrast in light levels, taking place before the adjustment can be made.

Knowing this I will not, repeat not, use even the mildest flash with possums. To do so would gratuitously hurt and distress them. It would be a breach of the "covenant", to borrow Lorenz's term for the relationship between man and dog, the unwritten, unspoken agreement upon which our relationship is based.

If a more practical, less sentimental reason is required, then it is this: your subjects take flight, and you don't see them again for the next week or so.

All this poses a problem, even now, as my recent unsuccessful attempts at videoing possums have shown me. Almost all the following photos were taken by my late mother or myself in the late nineteen-sixties and nineteen-seventies, that is to say, the age before domestic computers, mobile phones or even domestic answering machines. The then state of photographic equipment affordable by non-professionals was as one would expect, and this meant that the only alternative to flash photography was to use low, steady light, the same light as the possums were used to coming into for food or whatever, very fast film - people today would laugh themselves silly at what was considered 'very fast' then -, wide apertures and long exposures. In addition you had to adopt a certain philosophy: if five shots out of twenty were recognisable, you were doing well.

In practice there were difficulties with this approach. The possums I knew and know are used to coming into a low light, which is nevertheless adequate for all human purposes - except photography. It was necessary to supplement the usual light a little, with some steady light source that wasn't so bright as to put them off entirely - in practice this usually meant a directional light source such as a torch or reading lamp. Where the beam struck the surface there was a circle of light, of greater intensity than the surrounding light, and it "washed out" the part of the picture within its' ambit. This can give some rather spectacular effects, sometimes even humorously appropriate, like the "Mephistopheles - fire-eater" picture, but more often it resulted in headless, or disembodied possums.

Even stipulating all this it was still a dicey business. The slight increase in light level was obviously perceptible to them, something different, therefore perhaps sinister, enough to put them on their guard.

So you start with a jittery possum, then have to persuade it to stay still, or guess when it is going to stay still of its' own accord, long enough for the antediluvian film to expose. For long exposure is still necessary, usually long enough to mean a double click. And I am pleased to report that the possums went on the alert at the first click - at the second they took off. For "click" is also the noise made by the safety catch, or priming mechanism, of a gun. The net result was blurry pictures of apprehensive possums.

Of course, there are always exceptions: in any group there seems to be at least one individual who is a photographer's dream, often the phlegmatic, easy-going males who are used to coming out early, in the light, to get their dinner before the big girls come and jump on them. My mother got heartily sick of the sight of Mephistopheles through a camera view-finder; I became decidedly bored with similar views of Old Pink Pig, and even a little tired of photographing 'Miri'. It always seems to be the possums you want to photograph that are the hardest to catch - probably you want them for that reason. Mothers with babies are hardest of all. Females, generally, are shy with humans, and females with young babies are particularly nervous. Baby possums are especially light-sensitive: as with human babies, their eyes develop gradually, and muscular co-ordination involved in such things as light-adjustment and focussing comes only gradually - frequently when the baby first comes out of the pouch you will see it turning its' head apparently aimlessly in response to sounds and smells, gazing vacantly into space, quite obviously unable to focus on what it is trying to see, and they wince and flinch if you accidentally get the torch on their faces. And if the baby shows signs of distress, the mother is all the more likely to depart at the gallop, with the little one clinging on as best it can.

All in all, it is a matter of being profoundly grateful for what you do get, and repining not at all about what you don't.

So please take the following "as you find 'em, or not at all".

Rogues Gallery



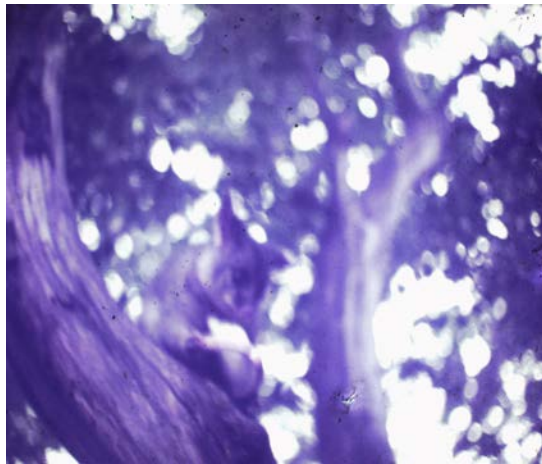
Pl. 1 Joe or Jenny - wary



Pl.2 Joey, disliking the light



Pl.3 Joey - Oh, what a big world!



Pl.4 Joe - was he or wasn't he?



8

Pl.5 Jenny - impossible to photograph



Pl. 6 Twiddley



Pl.8 Mephistopheles - fire-eater



Pl. 7 Mephistopheles



Pl.9 Foxy with Sherry



Pl.10 Snoopy, first picture, 18/9/1970



Pl.12 Getting better



Pl.13 "Sleeping can also be a positive activity"



Pl. 14, Snoopy with baby Kylie



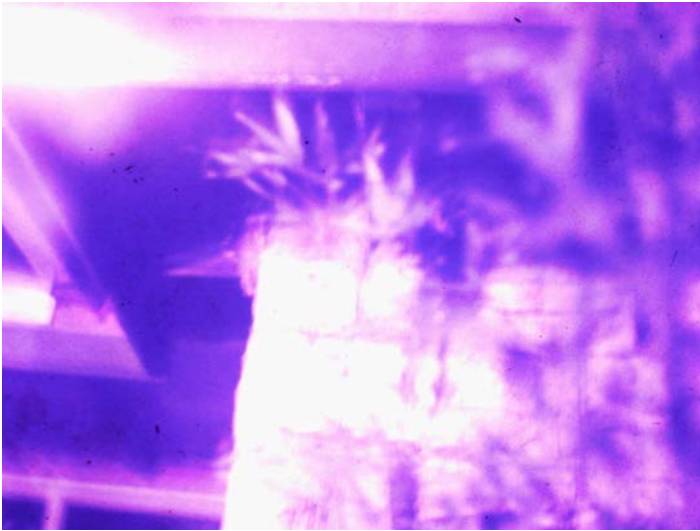
Pl. 15 `Miri', at Newport: Would I feed her immediately, please, and stop messing about with cabbalistic clicking boxes? Sept.30, 1977.



Pl.16. `Miri' at Newport, with Cassie, who at 8 days out of the pouch finds the big bad world very confusing and intimidating. Oct.26, 1977.



Pl.17 A bit less scary at 12 days.



Pl.18 Some possums are happy to live in a box under the eaves, and sometimes bring leaves in to 'make the place nice'



Pl.19 But Honeybunch preferred her box in a tree.



Pl.20 And Chrissie, like her mother 'Pumpkin', preferred her box on my then wardrobe.



Pl.21 'Pumpkin' and Pachy, October 1979



Pl. 22 Old Pig August 21 1977

Pl.23 'Horrible'/Shy Boy, Sheba, 25/8/77





Pl. 24 Battered Baby grown up...



Pl. 25 and doing...



Pl. 26 ...rather well



Pl.27 Local cats known to be harmless, like Smiley, may be ignored as...



Pl.28 ...just part of the local wildlife and environment, like meaningless human objects.



Pl.29 Elephant's tail, October 1979.