

The Virginia Opossum—One of a Kind

By Susan Camp

As Jim and I drove down the road to our house one night last week, we saw a pair of yellow eyes watching us from the roadside. As we drew closer, we saw that it was one of our welcome visitors, a Virginia opossum. It turned away and disappeared into the bushes, a pale gray ghost with a long, naked, rat-like tail.

The Virginia or North American opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) migrated from South to Central America about 3 million years ago, and from Mexico to North America about 1 million years ago. Today the range of the Virginia opossum stretches from Costa Rica north to Ontario and as far west as Nebraska and South Dakota. It is North America's only marsupial.

The name opossum, often shortened to “possum” is taken from the Algonquian (Powhatan) language from a term that means “white beast,” possibly in reference to the animal's pale face and grizzled gray fur. John Smith reported in 1612 that the housecat-sized opossum had the head of a pig and the tail of a rat, and the female had a pouch under her belly where she carried and nursed her young. John Smith must have known some small cats, because the Smithsonian's National Zoo reports that the average size of a male opossum is 16 inches in length plus an 11.6-inch prehensile tail and a weight of 4.6 to 6.2 pounds. Females are 16 inches long with an 11-inch tail and a weight range of 4.2 to 4.6 pounds. Most of the cats I know weigh 15 to 17 pounds.

What makes the opossum unique is that the pouch or marsupium under the female's belly is where she rears her young until they are mature enough to survive outside the protection of her body. The opossum gestation period is about 13 days. The jellybean-sized babies, called joeys, are born alive, naked, blind, and helpless. They pull themselves along with their forelegs to their mother's marsupium, where they remain for about 100 days, after which they will leave the pouch and head out on their own to live solitary lives except during mating season. The lifespan of the opossum is about 1 to 2 years in the wild, possibly 3 to 4 years in captivity.

The opossum is omnivorous and will consume fruits and vegetables growing in your garden, as well as birds, small mammals, worms, lizards, maggots, and eggs and baby chicks if it can get to them. And ticks. At least one study demonstrated that an opossum can eat several thousand ticks a year. I couldn't find that the study has been replicated, but an opossum that eats any number of ticks is welcome on our property. In addition, the opossum will consume roadkill and other carrion. The opossum is reported to be resistant to snake venom.

The opossum has a mouthful of 50 fearsome-looking teeth, which it will bare, accompanied by fierce hisses and screeches when it is frightened or cornered, but it is not an aggressive animal, and will run away when approached by a human.

Its party trick is to faint or “play possum,” while simultaneously emitting a foul-smelling secretion from its nether parts when frightened or attacked by another animal. Actually, playing dead is an involuntary reaction and can put the animal in danger of attack by a predator. The suspended animation state can last from a few minutes to several hours.

Opossum predators include foxes, owls, coyotes, humans, and cars. The opossum is resistant to rabies, possibly because it has a lower body temperature than most other mammals.

Photos of joeys riding on their mom's back draw "Oohs" and "Aahs" for their cuteness, and the opossum has a faithful following on Facebook with several pages and numerous videos of opossums dressed in cute outfits and eating fruit. It is not advised to keep a wild animal as a pet.

Google "Virginia opossum," and you will get about 1.57 million hits. Almost every state Cooperative Extension and wildlife department carries publications on this fascinating animal.

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