



Virginia Opossums

The Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) is the unsung hero of the animal kingdom. Their impressive set of skills and unique adaptations are often masked by misconception. Aside from their ability to eat venomous snakes, they also consume ticks and carrion, keeping communities free of disease. These misunderstood marsupials are the source of very few conflicts and many benefits.

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: Originally native to the southeastern United States, opossums were intentionally introduced into the western United States during the Great Depression, probably as a source of food. Their range has been expanding steadily northwards, thanks in part to more plentiful man-made sources of food and shelter. Opossums first arrived in Rhode Island in the 1960s and they can now be found throughout the state, except for Block Island, Prudence Island, and the smaller islands of the Narragansett Bay. Opossums occur in a wide variety of habitats; forests, agricultural land, urban and suburban neighborhoods. Their adaptability allows them to be both terrestrial (living predominantly on the land or ground) and arboreal (living in trees). Opossums do not dig burrows; instead they take shelter in the burrows of other animals, tree cavities, brush piles, and other cover.

Behavior: Opossums are nocturnal, which means they are most active at night, although they can sometimes be seen out during the day. They are solitary animals, with the exception of a mother and her young. Opossums do not hibernate in the winter, but they may remain in their dens during extremely cold weather. Since opossums originally came from a warmer climate, they are not adapted for cold temperatures, in the northern part of their range, individuals often display shortened tails and other signs of frostbite. **Injured wild animals must be cared for by a licensed rehabilitator. If you find an injured opossum, call the Wildlife Rehabilitators Association of RI at (401) 294-6363.**

If an opossum is threatened it may “play possum,” run away or try to avoid predation by growling, hissing, and baring its teeth. Although an opossum with bared teeth may look intimidating, they only feign boldness. This display will NOT lead to an attack, opossums are actually very timid.

Reproduction: A female opossum may produce one or two litters a year, and young may be born anytime between late winter and late spring. The female can give birth to over 20 tiny babies, but the average is seven young per litter. The offspring are about the size of a jelly bean when they are born after only a 13-day gestation period. Typical of marsupials, the females have a fur-lined pouch on their abdomen into which the underdeveloped young crawl, unaided. The young live within the pouch, nourished by milk from one of the mother’s 13 teats, for about two months. Once the juveniles outgrow the pouch, they will ride on the mother’s back until they are old enough to go out on their own. After 3 ½ months, the young opossums will leave the mother to hunt for food independently and establish their own territories.

Food Habits: Opossums are true omnivores and will eat everything from carrion to compost. They are opportunists, eating parasites and vermin such as ticks, cockroaches, snails, mice and rats. Opossums may occur at higher densities in suburban areas due to the availability of water, den sites, and human supplied resources such as pet food left out at night, fruit that has fallen from trees, and compost piles. They will also eat carrion, often in the form of roadkill.

IDENTIFICATION

- Triangular head with a long, pointed nose, rounded ears and hairless prehensile tail.
- Fur: White-gray body, black ears and white face with hairless pink nose, feet and tail.
- Length: 13-22 inches
- Weight: 4-13 pounds
- Lifespan: 1.5 to 2 years

Disease: Opossums carry few diseases that can infect humans and are a very rare host for the [rabies](#) virus. Between 2004 and 2014 there were only 25 cases of opossums contracting rabies within the US, and only one of those cases was in New England. This may be because of the opossum's low body temperature (94-97° F), which makes it difficult for the virus to survive within the body.

LIVING WITH OPOSSUMS

Opossums do not dig holes and are not a threat to people or most pets. They may even be a benefit to your property by eating disease-carrying ticks. They can, however, become a nuisance near homes where they are given access to garbage, bird feeders, or pet food.

RIDEM does not recommend that property owners attempt to live trap nuisance furbearers unless they are prepared and willing to euthanize the offending animal. State regulations prohibit the live capture and translocation of furbearers. Captured furbearers can only legally be released on the property on which they were captured.

Regulatory Status: Opossums are classified as a protected furbearer under Rhode Island General Law 20-16-1. In Rhode Island, state law (*RIGL 20-16-2*) allows a property owner to kill, by legal means, any furbearer (as defined in *RIGL 20-16-1*) that is killing or attempting to kill any livestock or domestic animals, destroying crops, creating a health hazard, or causing economic damage to their property. However, the law does not allow for the random taking of wildlife, for the taking of furbearers for their pelts outside the open season, or for killing of animals outside the boundaries of the property of the person with the problem. Also, it does not allow for unlawful methods of take such as poisons, snares, foothold traps, or discharge of firearms in violation of state or local ordinances. The law states that animals taken must be reported to the RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife within 24 hours.

[Click here](#) to find a Licensed Nuisance Wildlife Control Specialist near you.

For additional resources visit:
www.wildlifehelp.org

DID YOU KNOW?

- Opossums are the only marsupial native to North America. They carry their young in a pouch!
- The name opossum comes from the Algonquian word, "apousoum," meaning "white animal."
- Opossums have 50 teeth, more than any other North American land mammal.
- Possums (minus the "O") are actually a completely different animal, native to Australia.
- Opossums are immune to snake venom and studies are underway to use this superpower for a human antivenin.
- Opossums eat ticks!
- Opossums do not use their tails to hang upside-down but do use them to balance and carry nesting material.

"PLAYING POSSUM"

The opossum is well known for feigning death, or "playing possum" when threatened. This is an involuntary, temporary behavior caused by shock and is similar to fainting. They will appear stiff, with lips drawn back and may secrete a foul-smelling liquid to deter predators. If you find an opossum in this state, leave it in a quiet place with a clear exit path. Eventually, the animal will regain consciousness and leave on its own.

TIPS FOR PREVENTING PROBLEMS WITH OPOSSUMS:

- **Trash bins/dumpsters:** Trash should be secured in containers and only put out on the curb the morning of trash collection
- **Compost:** Never put meat scraps in piles, keep compost covered
- **Pet food dishes:** Avoid feeding pets outside or bring in dishes at night.
- **Livestock:** Secure livestock in pens or buildings.
- **Eliminate sources of shelter:** Build sheds on concrete if possible; Bury galvanized wire fencing 6-10 inches around raised structures in a "L" shape facing outward.

**NEVER INTENTIONALLY FEED WILDLIFE.
This causes problems for both
humans and wildlife.**