

Notable Natives

Opossum

Opossums are surprisingly beneficial to gardeners and to local habitats. It turns out they are smart, harmless, docile creatures who are easy to live alongside because they eat many insects and rodents that can damage gardens and landscapes. Even though they look like rats, they are important members of our natural surroundings, and we should welcome them into our yards!

Opossums are North America's only marsupial; females carry their young in a front pouch. The name "opossum" is derived from an Indian word meaning "white animal," and the ones we see here are usually *Didelphis virginiana*, Virginia or common opossum. They are the size of large house cats but can be smaller. They are slow-moving, passive animals that prefer to be left alone.

Intelligent creatures, they are considered to be as smart as or smarter than dogs and pigs. They have long snouts with small teeth, black eyes, round ears, pink pointed noses and dark grey to white fur and a hairless tail. They often use their tails to brace themselves while they're climbing but rarely hang from them.

Opossums are omnivorous foragers eating primarily slugs and wild berries, especially over-ripe fruit, but they will also eat insects such as cockroaches, crickets and beetles, rodents like mice and rats, and sometimes snakes. They have been known to eat road kill which has made them victims of road kill themselves. Because they do not hibernate, they must scavenge year round so they are always on the move.

Their gestation period is only four or five weeks, and the babies are born in a fetal state. Instead of a placenta to protect the embryos, marsupials use their pouches within which the young nurse and stay safe and warm and continue to grow. An infant marsupial is known as a joey, and it is born after only twelve to fourteen days gestation when it is the size of a honeybee or jellybean! It is blind and furless and must crawl across its mother's fur to find the pouch. It will emerge after

several weeks as a newborn. Then it is carried in its mother's pouch for up to three months after which it will hitch a ride on her back when traveling for another month or two.

As many as thirteen babies can nurse at once, but the mother may give birth to as many as twenty at a time. Most die because they are unsuccessful at finding their way into the pouch. During its development, the baby opossum returns to the pouch to sleep or, if in danger, it will seek refuge in its mother's pouch for safety. Overall, the opossum's life span is short, only two to four years, but its breeding season can begin as early as January and last into November, making it a proficient breeder.

Opossums rarely carry rabies and have strong immune systems that can even withstand a snake bite. They are nocturnal and live in dark, small spaces both above and below ground. They're not picky and prefer to find ready-made spaces such as another animal's den, underneath porches or tree holes. Typically, they live alone and are nomadic as they're always in search of new food and water sources. Occasionally, they will snuggle in another opossum family's den.

To confuse predators, they will "play 'possum" by acting dead when threatened. When playing dead, they actually lose consciousness and will not "awaken" for from forty minutes to four hours. Their main predators include humans (especially cars), dogs and cats, foxes, owls or larger



Opossum illustration by Margaret Hudson.

wildlife (although I once saw an aggressive male raccoon kill a 'possum in my yard). Desperately hungry red-tailed hawks can kill and eat them, but they have a hard time doing it.

Learning to live in harmony with opossums is easy once you know their positive attributes and their immense value to your yard.

— Sandi Alguire