



Do You Know...about opossums?

The Virginia Opossum, *Didelphis virginiana*, is the only marsupial found in the United States. They are members of a very primitive breed of mammal having existed on Earth basically unchanged for 60 million years. Marsupials are non-placental mammals; the babies are never attached to the mother by an umbilical cord but are born prematurely as embryos. Because of this, 'possums have no belly buttons! The babies, like kangaroos and koala, have to find their way unaided out of the birth canal, up the mother's belly and into her pouch. Once safely inside, they must find a nipple and attach to it. They stay attached for about 2 ½ months at which time they begin to take short trips out of the pouch and onto mom's back. The babies will stay with mom for 3 to 4 months and then disperse to start their own solitary lives.



Opossums are generally shy and retiring and pose no threat to humans or pets. If cornered, 'possums will face their tormentor, open their mouths to expose their teeth (all 50 of them), hiss, drool and prepare to defend themselves. Most people, on seeing this display, will back off and give the 'possum time to escape. We occasionally receive 'possums that will even lunge at us when we attempt to pick them up; but, most of the time, once held they seem not to be sure what else they should do. "Playing 'possum" is the other defensive maneuver 'possums have at their disposal. If approached suddenly in an open area where the animal can find no safe haven, they will freeze and then fall into an involuntary shock-like state. Their tongue lolls out, they drool, their eyes roll back into the heads, their breathing and heart rates slow and their bodies stiffen slightly. They may even exude

an unpleasant odor. This often will discourage a predator as most are interested in a fresher meal. Sadly, this act does not work against an automobile. Most of the babies that arrive at Second Chance have been removed from a road-killed mother.

At birth, 'possums are immune to a wide variety of illnesses. Diseases such as distemper, parvovirus and feline hepatitis do not occur in these animals and even rabies is nearly non-existent possibly due to their relatively low body temperature of about 96 degrees F. They are even immune to the venom of snakes with whom they share their habitat (rattle snakes, copperheads). In addition, they seldom fall victim to cancer. Oddly, at about 1 ½ to 2 years of age, the 'possum begins to develop problems associated with geriatric humans (arthritis, osteoporosis, etc.). Their normal life span, in the wild or in captivity, is 3 to 4 years, although one is on record as reaching eight years. Fortunately, their reproductive rate is high enough, as many as 13 in a litter, to guarantee their survival barring any gross negligence by mankind.

Opossums are the definition of an omnivore eating practically anything they come across. They are fond of fruit, especially if it is overly ripe, and will happily consume what falls on the ground leaving the "good" stuff for people. Slugs are a special treat as are a variety of other insects. They eat any number of water creatures such as crayfish, frogs, fish, and salamanders. They munch on snakes and mice, if they can catch them, and will also consume eggs including duck, goose, chicken, turtle, snake and songbird. They are also quite capable of catching chickens and ducks kept in pens. They help keep our highways clean by devouring road-kill unless they fall victim themselves.

These animals are not what you would call discriminating gourmets but certainly do more good than harm.

So, what should you do if you encounter an opossum? Sit back and watch this fascinating and beneficial creature, one of Mother Nature's special children.

Now, you know!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!

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