Patient Tale: Part II - “Fingers” Gets a Second Chance

Something you learn after doing wildlife rehab long enough is that just when you believe your patients are out of danger, they have a funny habit of proving you wrong. The male among the surviving baby opossums was no exception.

I was delivering breakfast and doing a quick visual check on our young patients one morning a few weeks after Alicia’s ordeal when I noticed blood in the cage and one of the babies limping over to the food dish. Upon closer inspection, I discovered to my horror that he had a serious bite wound in his paw, bleeding profusely and with one of the hand bones dislocated and exposed. I grabbed the opossum in one hand and a towel in the other, wrapping the paw in the towel to stop the bleeding until I could get downstairs. Much to my dismay, when I reached the treatment area and pulled the towel away to get a better look, the exposed bone came with it; apparently, only a small piece of tissue had been holding it in place.

Nothing much could be done about the bone, so I set about wrapping the wound as best I could. Luckily, our vet was scheduled to come in later that day, so I only had to clean and disinfect the wound and do a quick wrap to keep it from bleeding too much. The paw was three times the size of the other one, and the hole in the paw was nasty around the edges, but I did my best. Some antibiotics and painkillers helped tide him over until the vet arrived. When she did, we took the opossum upstairs and put him under anesthesia to allow us a more thorough cleaning and examination than we could on a conscious, painful animal. She said there was no way to put the bone back in, but if we could get the rest of the wound to heal cleanly, he should be okay with a missing metacarpal (finger bone). The trick was getting the wound to heal cleanly. Opossums are very adept at unwrapping bandages on their paws, so we had to rig an elaborate wrap up and around the body to try to prevent him from contaminating the wound. After that, it was a matter of crossed fingers and close monitoring – and keeping him away from his biting sisters!

To my profound relief, the bandage stayed in place pretty well, and when we removed it completely the following week, I was amazed at how good the wound looked. A week later, it was almost entirely healed, with one exception -- the first finger on his paw had slipped back to fill in the space from the missing metacarpal bone. With one finger shorter than all the rest, he was dubbed “Fingers.”

Though he was happy and healthy, Fingers didn’t seem to be using the paw as well as most opossums his age, and we became concerned about his ability to climb. Weeks passed, and Fingers graduated to an outdoor cage. I chose the biggest one possible, with lots of cage furniture to allow him room to move around and practice climbing. Every so often, I would take him out and bring him to a nearby tree, to see how he was able to climb with his hurt paw. Frustratingly, he was such a calm, laid-back opossum that he would usually just cling to the tree and look around, demonstrating neither climbing ability nor climbing inability.

Finally, only days before my summer break (and hence my time at Second Chance) came to an end, we took Fingers out for his usual test and he started moseying up the tree, favoring his stunted paw only the slightest bit. Success! Opening his cage door that night was one of the best going-away presents I could ask for—a happy ending to a long rehabilitation.

by Tara Flynn, summer staff