

Getting to know the timid but gentle possum



**Tips from the Posse**  
 By Mark Rackay

When I think about the possum, I always go back to the old “Beverly Hillbillies” television show. The possum was a favorite food for the Clampett clan, as Granny always had one in the pot. I am not sure how they found so many possums in southern California, but they always had one for supper.

The correct name is opossum but most folks call them possum. A true possum is actually a tree-climbing marsupial that lives in Australia, and is a distant cousin to the North American opossum.

Opossums originally hailed from South America. Worldwide, there are 103 species and 19 genera but for us in the United States, we have just one called the Virginia opossum. We have affectionately referred to the opossum as a possum for so many centuries; I don’t want to be the one who changes that. Science tells us that these critters have inhabited the earth, in one form or another, for almost 23 million years.

The term “opossum” originally comes from the Powhatan language and it means white dog. John Smith, from Jamestown, Virginia, encountered the opossum and recorded that it, “hath a head like a swine, a tail like a rat, and the bigness of a cat.” They also reported that is taste like pork, so apparently someone thought of them as food, even back in the 1600s.

Possums are a carnivorous mammal that belongs to the marsupial family, and the only members native to North America. Marsupials are a class of animals that carry their young in a pouch after a short gestation period. The most widely known marsupial is the Australian kangaroo.

Opossum are carnivorous by classification because of their teeth, but they are actually omnivores because of their diet. Scavengers by nature, the opossum will eat carrion, insects, frogs, fruit, earthworms, grubs, garbage, waste from other animals and just about anything else not nailed down. In fact, many opossum are killed on the road while they are feeding on other road kill.

Like most animals that survive in an urban environment, the opossum is mostly nocturnal. You can usually find them rummaging through trash or wandering along the roadside, during the early evening hours. They are a timid creature and try to avoid people and domestic animals.

They will climb trees but they do not hang from their tails. The tail hanging is an old country myth. Opossum will use their tail as a brace, or a fifth limb, when climbing a tree. They have also been known to carry small branches or leaves with their tail when building a nest.

Depending on the climate and environmental conditions, opossum can reproduce up to three times a year. The gestation period is very short, lasting only 11 to 14 days. The young are very tiny at birth, so small that 20 can fit in a teaspoon.

Once the young are born, they migrate to their mother’s pouch. The young will spend the first two-and-a-half months of their life in that pouch while they reach maturity. In Colorado, most breeding occurs from December through February, so the young will be active by the summer months.

Born with two big toes called halux, that act like opposable thumbs, opossums can climb trees with ease. They have this anatomical feature in common with monkeys.

Probably because their diet is so diverse, the opossum has an incredible immune system. It is very rare to find one with rabies and they are not considered carriers for the Lyme disease. They can, however, carry diseases such as tuberculosis, tularemia, and spotted fever.

It is good thing for the opossum to have such a good immune system to keep them healthy, because they have extreme-



The Virginia Opossum, sometimes called the possum, is a pretty common critter in our state. (Courtesy photo/John DeLorenzo/CPW)

ly poor hygiene. Their hygiene is so bad they are considered one of the filthiest of all North American Mammals. They can also carry a whole host of vermin in their fur and are commonly infested with fleas, ticks, mites and lice.

Because opossums eat fruit and can climb trees to reach it, they frequently contaminate an entire apple harvest, making them less than popular with growers. Though opossums are not dangerous by their temperament, their extremely poor hygiene and the variety of diseases they carry means people and their pets should not get close to them.

One thing opossum are known for is “playing possum.” When threatened or harmed, they will mimic the appearance of a sick or dead animal, complete with the smell. This physiological response is involuntary, similar to fainting, and not a conscious act.

When an opossum is “playing possum” the lips are drawn back, exposing the teeth, saliva foams around the mouth, the eyes close or half-close, and a very foul smelling fluid is secreted from the

anal glands. The stiff and curled up form of the critter can be prodded, turned over, and even carried away without a

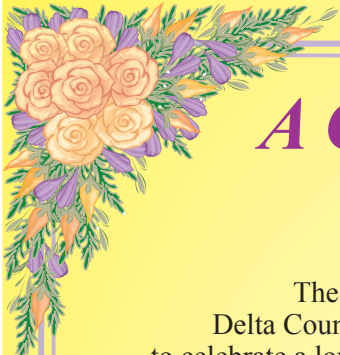

reaction. The animal will typically regain consciousness after a period of a few minutes, and up to about four hours. The

awakening process begins with the twitching of the ears.

In researching the opossum, I have decided that I am not likely to ever feel the urge to dine on one. I may, however, try playing possum when my wife is looking for me to do some chore of hers. I might have to practice that for a while.

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