

Opossum

Didelphis virginiana



Other common names

Virginia Opossum, possum

Introduction

The opossum is the only marsupial found in the United States. Like kangaroos, another well-known marsupial, opossums carry their young in a pouch called a *marsupium* for the early stages of development after birth. Once they've matured a bit, they climb out and hang onto their mother's back. Opossums are also known for their habit of "playing dead" when threatened, leading to the phrase "playing possum".

Physical Description and Anatomy

Opossums have short legs and a thick body. Their fur is coarse and grey to greyish-brown, with a white face. They have a pointed snout with a pink nose and prominent whiskers, beady eyes, and lots of sharp teeth. The ears are black and hairless, and the round, scaly tail is pink and also

hairless. The tail is prehensile, used for gripping on to branches while climbing. The innermost toe of the hind foot, called a hallux, is opposable and clawless.

Adults weigh anywhere from 4 – 15 lbs (1.8 – 6.8 kg). This weight varies seasonally, and they are often heaviest in the fall, in preparation for winter. Total length is 13-28 inches (33.0 – 71.1 cm). Males are generally larger than females.



Opossum skull.



Opossum pelt.

Identifying features (tracks, scat, calls)

Opossums will often use roads and trails created by humans to travel. Their tracks are very distinctive, with the widespread toes and the hallux on the hind foot. Tracks may or may not be accompanied by tail drag marks. Listen for growling or hissing, which indicates an opossum that feels threatened.



Opossum tracks.

Front: 1 – 1 11/16 inches long by 1 – 2 7/16 inches wide.

Hind: 1 7/16 – 2 3/8 inches long by 1 1/4 – 2 1/4 inches wide.



Opossum scat.

Habitat

Opossums can be found in a wide range of habitats from woodlands to farmland, though they prefer wet areas along streams and swamps. They've adapted very well to human activities, and can also be found in suburban and even urban areas.

Behavior and Diet

Opossums are nocturnal, solitary animals. They are omnivorous, opportunistic feeders, eating a wide variety of foodstuff. They eat seasonally available vegetation like hard and soft mast, roots, grasses, forbs, and the leaves of woody plants. They also eat invertebrates and small mammals, reptiles, amphibians, and birds and their eggs. They will also eat carrion and roadkill, which often results in them being struck by cars and becoming roadkill themselves. Near human habitations, they will dig through garbage and raid bird feeders as well as stealing pet food.

Opossums are good swimmers and climbers, using their prehensile tail to grip branches. Their feet, ears, and tails are prone to frostbite, so they don't venture out into deep snow very often. They den in hollow trees and logs, as well as the abandoned dens of other mammals. They may collect dry leaves and other plant debris, carrying it with their prehensile tails to their den to build a nest. These dens are temporary, as they are nomadic creatures and move around frequently in search of new sources of food.

When threatened, opossums are known for their habit of "playing dead" rather than running away from some threats. They will hiss, urinate, defecate, and go limp, lowering their rate of breathing so it's almost undetectable, and may remain in that state for as long as 4 hours. This behavior deters predators that prefer fresh kills and avoid carrion. Predators that target opossums include bobcats, wolves, coyotes, foxes, predatory birds, and snakes. They are capable of living up to 7 years, but often live only 2 or 3 in the wild.

Human Interactions

Opossums are frequent victims of vehicle collisions. They are also considered a nuisance species, as they are attracted by a number of human habits that provide an easy food source. They have adapted well to these human activities, and as a result their range has expanded along with humans.

Reproduction

Opossums reach sexual maturity at about 1 year, and can produce two litters every year. Litters usually contain 6 – 9 young, but there may be as many as 13. They often breed in late winter, and young are born at an early stage of development, after a gestation period of only 12 – 13 days. At birth they are about the size of a honeybee, and their hind feet are not yet developed. They use their front legs to crawl up into the mother's marsupium where they latch onto one of her nipples and remain attached for 2 months. At this point, their eyes open and they detach from the nipple, but remain in the pouch for another 2 – 3 weeks. After leaving the pouch, they

ride on the mother's back, clinging to her fur as she travels. They stay with the mother until they are weaned at around 100 days when they become independent and disperse.

Fun Facts

Opossums have a prehensile tail.

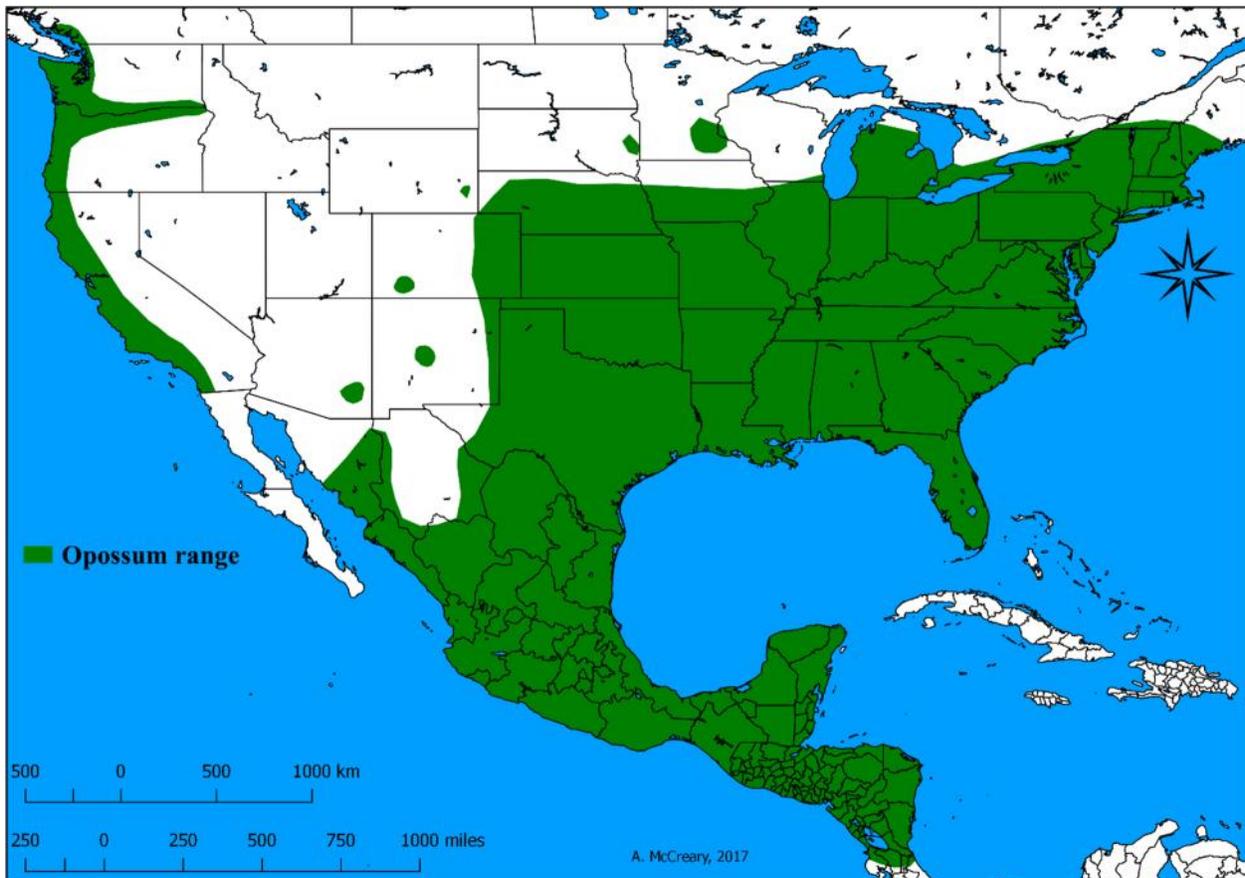
They will “play possum” if they feel threatened.

They have an opposable digit on each hind foot, called a hallux.

Opossums are marsupials like kangaroos, raising their young in a pouch, called a marsupium.

Range and Status

Opossums are found in eastern North America from southern Canada to Mexico, and even into Central America. They've been introduced to the western coast of the United States as well. Their range may be expanding as a result of human activities, and is limited to the north by winter temperatures.



Management and Research in New York

Opossums are managed in New York as a small game species. They are occasionally hunted as a source of meat and for their fur.

At Dyken Pond

Opossums are not often seen at Dyken Pond. In the wild they are elusive, and like raccoons they tend to congregate around human habitations, which provide easy meals on a regular basis.

Sources

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