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Opossums are Okay

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Did you know that opossums are North America's only marsupial? Like Australia's kangaroos and koalas, our native opossum gives birth to undeveloped young who make their way into their mother's pouch to nurse and finish developing.

Another interesting fact about opossums is that these solitary creatures have been roaming the earth for over 70 million years. That means they were around when the dinosaurs were. To what do they owe their longevity as a species? Probably adaptability and, although they have a short life span or only 2 to 4 years, they can have up to 3 litters per year and up to 13 babies in a litter.

Opossums might be more beloved if they looked as cute as a koala. Instead, as Captain John Smith in 1608 put it, "An Opassum hath an head like a Swine, a taile like a Rat, and is of the bignes of a Cat." He is believed to have fashioned the term opossum from the Algonquian word, 'opassum' meaning 'white animal'. The bottom line is that these unique, nocturnal, native inhabitants of North America are often disliked because of their rather unattractive appearance.



Opossum with babies from www.wildlifecenter.org

Typically opossums are about 2 feet long and weigh in around 10 pounds. Their mating season runs from February to June, depending on what part of the country they live in. Once the babies, which are called joeys, just like kangaroos, are born and enter their mom's pouch, they usually remain there for about 3 months. Then they climb onto her back and begin learning how to find food and other survival skills. Pregnant or nursing mothers are slow and often succumb to attacks by predators including domestic dogs and because they eat roadkill are also likely to be struck by cars. If they survive, the young are ready to strike out on their own at about 5 months of age.

With their prehensile tails, opossums can grasp tree branches and this helps them climb along with the opposable 'thumbs' on their rear feet, known as a hallux. Only primates and opossums have these opposable 'thumbs'. While an opossum could hang from a tree branch by its tail for short amounts of time, it does not sleep in this position as some believe.

Although opossums have 50 teeth and will bare their teeth when threatened, they are typically docile animals and would rather avoid conflicts. When confronted, opossums may run, belch, growl and release bodily fluids. Appearing dead or 'playing possum' is an involuntary, last resort tactic. The animal keels over and becomes stiff with saliva forming at the mouth and an ill-smelling secretion is released from their glands. Often this is enough of a deterrent to predators and this catatonic state could last up to 4 hours.

One of the main reason for appreciating this creature is its omnivorous diet. Opossums eat almost anything including insects, slugs, small rodents, amphibians, bird's eggs, carrion, fruits, grains and plants. They will also eat pet food, if left outside. Among the insects they eat are ticks, including the black-legged tick that spreads Lyme disease and likely other tick-borne diseases. Despite their disheveled look, opossums spend much time grooming themselves, just like house cats. In doing so, they pick off and consume any ticks found on their bodies. One study suggests that a single opossum may destroy 5000 ticks over the course of one season. This means that in their short lifetimes, potentially an opossum could kill up to 20,000 ticks! According to Rick Ostfeld who wrote a book on Lyme disease ecology, "In a way, opossums are the unsung heroes in the Lyme disease epidemic".

They also eat plenty of garden pests like slugs, snails and beetles. One reason why they are often roadkill is that they are looking for carrion to feed on. For unknown reasons, they seem to have a high demand for calcium and that is found in the bones of other creatures – including those killed by cars. Opossums have also been observed killing cockroaches and where there are healthy opossum populations (a group of possums is known as a passel by the way), rat populations are down. It is suspected that the opossums effectively compete with rats for food sources.

Although opossums are usually nocturnal, occasionally one will be spotted during the day leading folks to worry about whether the animal would be rabid. As it turns out, opossums are practically immune to rabies so most likely it is searching for food or something disturbed it.

The bottom line is that opossums are valuable players in our natural and even developed ecosystems. If you see an opossum, leave it alone. Do not attract them by leaving pet food outside or trash uncovered. Occasionally they will make their way into homes or sheds to raise their young. Take care that any holes are properly sealed so they can't get in.

Appreciate them for the pest controllers and scavengers that they are. Our world is safer and more pest free with them in it. Keep in mind that they have been here longer than our immigrant ancestors and allow them to live the life they have either become accustomed or adapted to. Those who do want to learn more about, promote and protect opossums may be interested in joining the [Opossum Society of the United States](#).

For more information about opossums or other horticultural topics, feel free to contact us, toll-free, at the UConn Home & Garden Education Center at (877) 486-6271, visit our website at www.ladybug.uconn.edu or contact your local Cooperative Extension center.