

## Opossums

In your neighborhood at night you may see an animal with stiff white and gray hair, naked ears, a long scaly tail, and opposable thumbs on each hind foot that it uses for climbing. It is about 2-3 feet long and weighs between 4-10 pounds. An opossum is a solitary animal with simple needs: nearby food, water, and safe, dark place to sleep during the day.

The opossum has existed since the days of the dinosaurs. It is the only marsupial native to North America. Like kangaroos, marsupials carry and nurse their young inside their mothers' abdominal pouch. The baby opossums reach this pouch by traveling down the birth canal as bee-sized embryos and crawling up 2 inches to their mother's pouch, a process that takes about 10 minutes. On reaching the pouch they attach themselves to one of thirteen nipples that swell to secure the attachment and provide them with nourishment for over two months. When they grow to 4-5" they leave the pouch and travel on their mother's back. At six months when they are 7" long nose to rump (not including their tails), they leave their mother and live on their own.

Do not be afraid of opossums. They tend to be nonaggressive and shy. They will rarely fight and won't harm us if we leave them alone to do what they do best – clean up our neighborhoods by eating just about anything they find: insects, snails, slugs, grubs, cockroaches, garbage, mice, carrion, pet food left out, fruits, grains, even snakes. When they groom themselves they lick off and kill any ticks that are attached to them, including ticks that carry Lyme disease.

If threatened, an opossum first tries to escape but moves very slowly. However, if it is cornered on the ground it growls, hisses, and bares its 50 sharp teeth, hoping to frighten predators away. Always keep people and pets away from opossums. In defense, as a last resort, they emit a smelly substance from their anal glands, drool, and defecate. Their bodies enter into a catatonic state for a while, in which their nervous system automatically lowers their heartbeat and

reduces their breathing, making them appear dead and causing some predators to lose interest. This condition is popularly known as “playing ‘possum.”

If you find an apparently dead opossum, leave it for a while in a quiet place with a clear exit path, and allow it to escape on its own. If you find an apparently dead opossum by the road and it appears to be a female with babies in her pouch, put on protective gloves. Use a towel to help transfer the dead mother to a box with a lid, and take her to the nearest wildlife rehabilitation center. (Gloves and a towel stored in a vehicle have many uses.) Exercise great caution when picking her up. Opossums have very sharp teeth. If the mother is truly dead, the babies, if still alive, may have a chance of being saved.

A list of wildlife rehabilitation centers in the United States is available here.

<http://www.nwrawildlife.org/content/finding-rehabilitator>

Opossums’ lives are short (up to 3 years) and difficult. Their natural predators—dogs, foxes, hawks, and owls plus automobiles claim the lives of many. If you are driving and see an opossum in the road make every effort to avoid it, even if it appears to be lifeless. An opossum’s instinct to play dead when sensing danger cannot protect it from advancing vehicles.

If opossums travel through your yard, keep your dogs in at night. Turn on the outdoor lights and take the dogs out on a leash for necessary bathroom breaks. Leashing your dog at night, even when you take the dog outside for potty breaks, also prevents dangerous encounters between your dog and other nocturnal wildlife such as raccoons and skunks.

**Opossum situations and solutions. Following these suggestions will also discourage visits from roof rats, raccoons, and skunks.**

The presence of an opossum in your yard can mean that there is something nearby that it wants: a dark place under a deck or house, tool shed, garages, or attic to shelter it during the day when it sleeps; food such as vegetable gardens, compost piles, dishes of pet food left outside, carrion, fruits, nuts, and small mammals such as mice; and a source of water. If your property does not provide an opossum with these three amenities (shelter, food, and water), it will simply pass through your property on its way to a property that does provide them.

Keep in mind that opossums do not harm your garden so it is best to let them wander through it in safety and *leave them alone*. If you wish to discourage visits from opossums, here are ways to deter them.

## **Deterring Opossums**

Following these suggestions will also discourage visits from roof rats, raccoons, and skunks.

### **1) Remove attractants.**

Trim back overgrown shrubbery and leave at least 5 feet between your rooftop and trees that overhang it. Pick up fallen fruit frequently. Stack your firewood so that there are no openings that lead to a potential den. Have tight fitting lids on your garbage cans and on your compost bin. Feed pets indoors and put away any uneaten pet food. Close and lock pet doors at night, keeping the cat indoors.

### **2) Use repellents. Turn on a light, play a radio, close up access holes with a tight cover, place a rag or sponge in a bowl and saturate it with ammonia.**

If opossums have found an opening to your crawlspace under the house you need to find the openings that allow it to enter the crawlspace. Try placing a light under the house, and play a radio under the house during the day to encourage the opossum to move on.

Before permanently closing access holes possibly used by an opossum, lightly sprinkle and smooth 1/8-inch of flour outside the access opening. The flour will record the opossum's footprints when it goes out at night and indicate which opening the opossum uses. Before the next time the opossum leaves for its nightly food search close all openings (except for the one that had the opossum's footprints) with 1/4-inch hardware cloth. The small mesh will also keep out roof rats and mice. Place rumpled paper or soft netting that an animal can push aside in the remaining access hole. The next time the opossum leaves for its nightly activity and you see its footprints in the flour leading away from that access hole, permanently close up the hole with 1/4-inch hardware cloth.

Ammonia-soaked rags placed in shallow bowls near the den area can emit strong odors to discourage an opossum from remaining. If you combine closing up access holes with other deterrents such as radio noise, light, and ammonia, the opossum will soon look for another place to sleep.

### **3) Wrap fruit and nut tree trunks with 18" wide sheet metal up to 5-6 feet above the ground, and pick up fallen fruit and nuts.**

Sheet metal 18-inches or wider wrapped around tree trunks up to 5 feet above ground will discourage opossums from climbing trees. Never use sticky substances that are designed to trap permanently animals that touch or walk on them. Sticky products can harm and kill a wide variety of wildlife, including birds. Terrified critters that get stuck sometimes tear off their limbs attempting to escape.

### **4) Fence opossums out of a specific area.**

If you want a specific area of your garden to be off-limits to opossums, you can construct a fence of poultry wire 4 feet high with the top 12-18 inches bent outward away from the garden and minimally attached to any support. Without support, the fence will bend under the weight of the opossum and make it difficult for the animal to climb over it.

## **5) Keep chickens safe from opossums.**

If you have chickens on your property it is essential to provide a predator-proof house and yard for them. Opossums prey on chickens but do so less than raccoons. Chickens and other small animals such as domestic ducks and rabbits are extremely vulnerable to predators. They depend on us to keep them safe. Building a predator-proof chicken house and chicken yard can prevent attacks on chickens that can traumatize your family and cause great suffering to your chickens. Find a detailed description of predator-proof housing for chickens at the following link:

<http://creativecrittersolutions.homeip.net/safeChickens.php>

We owe opossums our gratitude for helping to keep our gardens clean and for eating insects and garden pests such as snails and slugs. Lucky is the resident whose garden is visited by an opossum.

Information courtesy of *www.creativecrittersolutions.org*