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Nature News: The Curious Life Of An Opossum

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By Angela McLaughlin - Ramona Home Journal



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...once it has already disappeared into the night do you realize it was an opossum.

"Although many people refer to native opossums as 'possums,' the term 'possum' technically refers to a classification of marsupials living in Australia, New Guinea and Sulawesi," says Gina Taylor, registered veterinary technician and animal caregiver at The Fund for Animals Wildlife Center located in Ramona.



Ranging across most of the U.S., the Virginia opossum is the only species in North America. And these fascinating little creatures offer much to consider.

Opossums are marsupials, meaning they are mammals born incompletely developed and carried in their mother's pouch while they complete their development.

As solitary animals, opossums only come together during breeding season. According to Taylor, they breed between January and October, producing up to two litters of four to thirteen young, also called "joeys."

The females are called "jills" and the males "jacks," while a group is called a "passel."

Opossums are solitary animals, mainly active at night.

"Although these tiny, blind and naked babies are no bigger than a honeybee, they each must crawl on their own all the way to their mother's pouch," Taylor says, adding that they will begin to nurse inside the mother's pouch and will remain there for two to three months as they continue to develop.

After leaving the pouch, the young remain with the mother for approximately two weeks, clinging to her fur as she carries them with her.

Taylor says that while opossums are really good mothers as far as protecting and cleaning them, they are not great at keeping track of their young. And if a young one falls off of her, it is often left behind. This makes them one of the few species most rehabbers will recommend bringing in right away for care, depending upon their size.

Opossums are nocturnal omnivores, meaning they are mainly active at night, and they consume both plant and animal matter. These scavengers and opportunistic feeders mainly feed on dead animals and plants, but Taylor says they also love insects and occasionally hunt small animals, such as chicks and snakes.

"Their normal diet consists of carrion, rodents, insects, snails, slugs, birds, eggs, frogs, plants, fruits and grains," she says. "They also eat human food, and dog and cat food."

She adds that their bodies' need for calcium makes them a great benefit to a home garden, as they will consume the skeletons of any rodents they kill, and they love to indulge in the snails, slugs and beetles that often plague gardens.

"They're the sanitation workers of the wild!"

Not only do they help protect gardens from other pests, but they also help protect homes by competing with rats and cockroaches for food — and they will prey on them, as well.

Interestingly, opossums also have partial or total immunity to the venom of rattlesnakes and other pit vipers.

These captivating marsupials are interesting in other ways. Taylor references a study conducted by a University of Florida researcher that found that the existence of opossums traces as far back as the extinction of the dinosaurs — so they've had a long time to find their place in this world.

They are also much smarter than most people give them credit for, with a remarkable ability to find food.

"When tested for the ability to remember where food is, opossums scored better than rats, rabbits, cats and dogs, but not as well as humans," she says.

Their skill as climbers comes from their opposable rear toes, or hallux, and their long tails. But while they may be good climbers, they prefer to make their homes on the ground.

Taylor also debunks the popular belief that opossums hang by their tails from tree limbs.

"Though the opossum does use his prehensile tail to assist in climbing, the adult is far too heavy to support himself by tail alone," she says, adding that young opossums may occasionally briefly hang to keep from falling, but this isn't common.

Those who come into contact with them will be happy to hear that their low body temperature and strong immune system make it very rare for one to carry rabies.

"In fact," Taylor says, "They are eight times less likely to carry rabies compared to wild dogs."

And while many people believe they are dirty animals, Taylor says they are incredibly clean, grooming and bathing themselves meticulously.

Though they are beneficial, some residents may prefer not to have them as neighbors. To prevent an opossum from taking up residence near a home, it is important to remove the things they need the most — food, water and shelter. Clear away fallen fruit and seeds, store trash and animal food in sealed containers, and clean up any trees or structures that may provide good shelter.

Though not aggressive by nature, opossums can make themselves look pretty fearsome. Taylor says they will run, bare their teeth, drool and even growl when threatened.

"When all else fails, they 'play possum' and act as if they are dead.

It is an involuntary response (like fainting) rather than a conscious act. They roll over, become stiff, and close their eyes or stare off into space, and bare their teeth as saliva foams around the mouth and a foul-smelling liquid is secreted from the glands," she says, adding that this catatonic state can last up to four hours.

If you find an opossum in such a state, it is best to leave it alone in a quiet place with room to escape. Taylor assures that it will eventually regain consciousness and escape quietly on its own.

These beneficial and interesting mammals are one of the many creatures we share the landscape with. And perhaps during your next encounter, you'll remember some of the more-fascinating aspects of their existence.

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