

Awesome Opossums!

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Spring is here, and that means we'll start seeing more wildlife as they shake their winter survival strategies. In this species highlight, we'll talk about a critter who's probably happy to not have its tail frozen off anymore (literally)!

Opossums are small mammals with mostly gray, sometimes brown, fur that ranges from dark to light. They have hairless toes, tails, and ears. Their faces are long and cone shaped; they're about the size of a house cat. But what makes them so special? Let's find out, and clear up some misconceptions about them!

We only have one species of opossum in the U.S. and Canada: the Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*). Opossums are a marsupial, like kangaroos and wallabies. This means we have a native marsupial right in our backyards! The Virginia opossum is our only marsupial, which is just one reason why our local opossum is so unique.

Being marsupials, opossum females have a pouch for their babies. Marsupial babies are born premature and spend the rest of their development in mama's pouch. Opossum babies are called "joeys," just like kangaroos, and mama opossums can have up to 13 joeys at a time. Once they're big enough, the joeys will crawl out of the pouch and ride around on mama's back.



Virginia opossum with joeys

What do they eat? Just about anything. Opossums are omnivores, like raccoons and black bears, and will eat a wide variety of foods. Their dietary spectrum includes: fruit, veggies, eggs, mice, bugs (including cockroaches), meat, snakes, carrion (already decaying meat), nuts, and most things we toss in the trash. Overripe fruit that's been in the fridge too long? Brown apples? Questionable leftovers? Many things that humans probably wouldn't eat anymore are a smorgasbord for opossums (but that doesn't mean everything we throw out is healthy for them)!

There are a lot of misconceptions about our opossum. Let's clear up some of them:

Myth: Opossums carry rabies.

Truth: Virginia opossums are naturally immune to rabies due to their low body temperature. As long as they're healthy, they can't get or spread rabies.

Myth: Opossums can hang upside down by their tails.

Truth: No, they can't! Adult opossums lack the tail muscles to hold their body weight while hanging upside down. Their tail is prehensile, but they use it like another hand to help balance and grip when climbing between branches. Joeys are very light and can be seen hanging upside down, but only for moments at a time.

Myth: If you see an opossum during the day, it's sick.

Truth: This is false. Opossums might be out during the day if they are spooked out of their hiding spot, looking for a new area, or searching for food. Predators and disturbances can cause them to alter their behavior. I've seen opossums out in the daylight during the winter eating at bird feeders while there's still enough seed to go around.

Myth: Opossums are dirty.

Truth: They clean themselves very regularly, similar to cats. They do lots of grooming to remove bugs and dirt from their bodies. Their less-than-pleasant smell is part of their natural defense.

Myth: Opossums eat thousands of ticks a week.

Truth: Sadly, this is not true. Recent research revealed that our assumptions about opossums being tick munchers is incorrect. Ticks are not a preferred part of the opossum diet, but they do probably eat the ones they find on their bodies while grooming.

Opossums are a fun and special animal in our state. They may not always be the most photogenic, but they are a good wild neighbor to have around. I hope you'll look at this North American marsupial in a new light and learn more about how to support them and other wildlife in your area.