



# Virginia Opossum

(*Didelphis virginiana*)

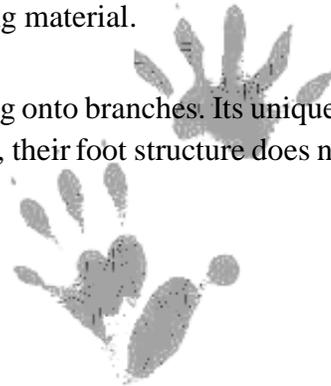


The Virginia opossum, *Didelphis virginiana*, is the only marsupial native to North America. It occurs throughout much of the eastern United States and due primarily to human activities, continues to expand its range. The name is derived from an Algonquian Indian word “apasum”, meaning “white animal.”

## Description

The opossum is about the size of a large house cat. It has a triangular head, a long, pointed nose and 50 teeth, more than any other North American land mammal. It has white-gray fur everywhere but on its ears, feet and tail. One of the most characteristic features is the white face and pink nose. A common misconception is that the opossum hangs upside down by its tail. Its hairless tail is prehensile, however, and is instead used for grasping branches, balancing and carrying nesting material.

The opossum also has opposable thumbs on its hind feet for holding onto branches. Its unique foot structure allows it to climb easily into virtually any place. Although good climbers, their foot structure does not allow the opossum to run quickly, so it waddles as it moves.



## Life History

**Range:** Originally native to the southeastern United States, opossums were intentionally introduced into the western United States during the Great Depression, probably as a source of food. Their range has been expanding steadily northwards, thanks in part to more plentiful and man-made sources of fresh water, increased shelter from urban encroachment, and milder winters. Their range has extended into Ontario, Canada, and they have been found as far north as Toronto. Older opossums found in the northern part of their range often display shortened tails and ears due to frostbite.

Opossums did not occur in Rhode Island prior to the 1960s. Today, they can now be found throughout the state, except for Block Island, Prudence Island, and the smaller islands of the Narragansett Bay.

Opossums occur in a wide variety of habitats; forests, agricultural land, urban and suburban neighborhoods. Their adaptability allows them to be both terrestrial (living predominantly on the land or ground) and arboreal (living in trees). Opossums take shelter in the burrows of other animals, tree cavities,



brush piles, and other cover.

**Behavior:**

Opossums are nocturnal, which means they are most active at night although they can sometimes be seen out during the day. They do not hibernate in the winter, but they may remain in their dens during extremely cold weather.

The opossum is well known for feigning death, or “playing possum” when threatened. This display gives the opossum the appearance and smell of a sick or dead animal. In this involuntary state, the lips are drawn back, teeth are bared, saliva foams around the mouth, and a foul-smelling fluid is secreted from the anal glands, making the opossum unattractive to predators. Their stiff, curled form, can be prodded, turned over, and even carried away. This is a temporary behavior caused by shock and is similar to fainting. Many injured opossums have been killed by well-meaning people who find a catatonic animal and assume the worst. If you find an injured or apparently dead opossum, the best thing to do is leave it in a quiet place with a clear exit path. In minutes or hours the animal will regain consciousness and leave on its own.

Another opossum tactic to avoid predation is to growl, hiss, and bare its teeth. Although an opossum with bared teeth may look intimidating and aggressive, this display is a defensive mechanism and does **NOT** lead to an attack by the opossum. Opossums are not aggressive animals. It is feigning boldness, hoping that the predator will be intimidated enough to leave the opossum alone. It may also simply run away from the threat.

**Food Habits:** Opossums are true omnivores and will eat everything from carrion to compost. They tend to benefit any area they inhabit because of their opportunist diet, which includes parasites and vermin such as ticks, cockroaches, snails, mice and rats. Opossums may occur at higher densities in suburban areas due to the availability of water, den sites, pet food left out at night, fruit that has fallen from trees, and compost piles. They will also eat carrion, often in the form of roadkill. The opossum helps keep neighborhoods clean and free of unwanted, harmful garden pests and rodents, which may carry diseases.

**Reproduction:** A female opossum may produce one or two litters a year, and young may be born anytime between late winter and late spring. The female can give birth to over 20 tiny babies, but the average is seven young per litter. The offspring are born after only a 13-day gestation period and are about the size of a bee at birth.



Typical of marsupials, the females have a fur-lined pouch on their abdomen into which these tiny, underdeveloped young crawl, un-aided. The young live within the pouch, nourished by milk from one of the mother’s 13 teats, for about two months. Once the juveniles outgrow the pouch, they will ride on the mother's back until they are old enough to go out on their own. Mother opossums carry their babies on their backs each night when they search for food. After 3 ½ months, the young opossums will leave the mother to hunt for food on their own, and establish their own territories. Opossums are not territorial and are solitary, with the exception of a mother and her young.

They only live about 1 to 2 years in the wild due to predators and human activity, specifically vehicle collisions.

## **Opossums as Disease Carriers**

Opossums carry few diseases that can infect humans. They are a very unlikely host for the rabies virus and according to the CDC, the occurrence of rabies in an opossum is extremely rare. In fact, between 2004 and 2014 there were only 25 cases of opossums contracting rabies- and only one of those cases was in New England. This is extremely low compared to raccoons which had nearly 25,000 cases in that same ten years. This may be because of the opossum's low body temperature (94-97° F), making it difficult for the virus to survive within the body.

## **Regulatory Status**

Opossums are classified as a protected furbearer under Rhode Island General Law 20-16-1. In Rhode Island, state law (RIGL 20-16-2) allows a property owner to kill, by legal means, any furbearer (as defined in RIGL 20-16-1) that is killing or attempting to kill any livestock or domestic animals, destroying crops, creating a health hazard, or causing economic damage to their property. However, the law does not allow for the random taking of wildlife, for the taking of furbearers for their pelts outside the open season, or for killing of animals outside the boundaries of the property of the person with the problem. Also, it does not allow for unlawful methods of take such as poisons, snares, foothold traps, or discharge of firearms in violation of state or local ordinances. The law states that animals taken must be reported to the RIDEM Division of Fish and Wildlife within 24 hours.

RIDEM does not recommend that property owners attempt to live trap nuisance furbearers unless they are prepared and willing to euthanize the offending animal. State regulations prohibit the live capture and translocation of furbearers. Captured furbearers can only legally be released on the property on which they were captured. For additional information contact the RIDEM Division of Fish & Wildlife at [DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov](mailto:DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov) or by calling (401) 789-0281.

Unlicensed persons cannot keep opossums as pets or try to rehabilitate them. Injured opossums must go to a licensed rehabilitator and no unlicensed person should attempt to handle any wild animal. To contact the Rhode Island Wildlife Clinic, please call 401-294-6363.

## **Damage Prevention**

The RIDEM Division of Fish & Wildlife does not receive many calls about damage done by opossums. Opossums do not dig holes and are not a threat to people or most pets. They may even be a benefit to your property by eating disease-carrying ticks. They can, however, become a nuisance near homes where they are given access to garbage, bird feeders, or pet food.

Securing trash containers, routinely cleaning under bird feeders and not feeding pets outdoors or bringing food dishes in at night is the best way to avoid problems with opossums or other wildlife species. If you are having problems with opossums, visit [www.wildlifehelp.org](http://www.wildlifehelp.org) for information on avoiding issues with wildlife in a safe and humane way. You can also contact a nuisance wildlife control specialist (NWCS). NWCS are licensed by RIDEM and can legally trap and remove problem animals and assist with preventing future problems by “wildlife-proofing” the property. For a list of licensed NWCS visit [www.dem.ri.gov](http://www.dem.ri.gov).

To avoid problems with opossums and other wildlife:

- **Do Not** leave pet food outside where it is accessible to wild animals.
- **Do Not** leave garage doors, pet doors or unscreened windows open at night.
- **Do Not** intentionally feed wild animals.
  
- **DO** pick up fruit that has fallen from trees.
- **DO** secure garbage in containers that are inaccessible to animals.
- **DO** secure areas under decks, porches, and sheds with fencing to prevent access.
- **DO** fence your gardens.
- **DO** clean up under bird feeders.
- **DO** remove brush piles/debris piles that may provide den sites.
- **DO** properly secure chickens or any other domestic fowl in coups and enclosures.



### **Selected References**

Monroe, B.P., et al. 2016. Rabies surveillance in the United States during 2014. Public Veterinary Medicine: Public Health. [2016 April 1; 2016 June 23]; 248 (7): 777-788.

Opossum photographs courtesy of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

Whitaker, J. and H. William. 1998. Mammals of the Eastern United States. 3rd ed. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

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