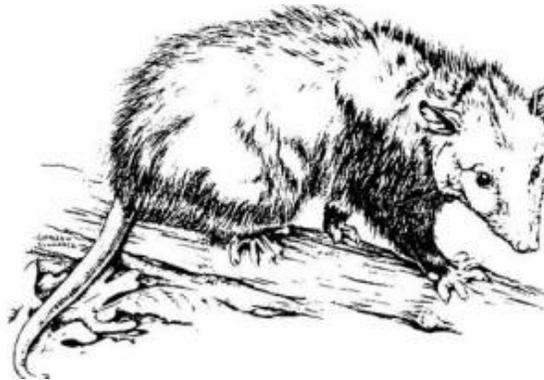




Opossums in Rhode Island



The opossum, *Didelphis virginiana*, is one of the world's oldest living mammals. Nicknamed the living fossil, the opossum dates back to the days of the dinosaur. They have existed for about 70 million years and are the only native marsupials in North America.

Description:



Captain John Smith first used the name 'opossum' in western culture in 1608. It is derived from an Algonquian Indian word "apasum", meaning "white animal". 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 North American land mammal. It has white-gray fur everywhere but on its ears, feet and tail. Its hairless tail is prehensile and is used for grasping branches, balancing and carrying nesting material. The opossum does not hang upside down by the tail, a common misconception.

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 it is a good climber, their foot structure does not allow the opossum to run quickly and it waddles as it moves.



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 in the hopes that the predator will be intimidated enough to leave the opossum alone. It may also simply run away from the threat.



Life History:

Opossums are nocturnal, meaning they are most active at night. They do not hibernate in the winter but they may remain in their dens during extremely cold weather. They only live about 1 to 2 years in the wild due to predators, including humans and their cars.



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 may 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, under-developed young crawl unaided. The young live and drink milk from one of the mother's 13 teats in the pouch for about 2 months. As they grow and the pouch becomes full, the juveniles then 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. Opossums are not territorial and are solitary, with the exception of a mother with young.

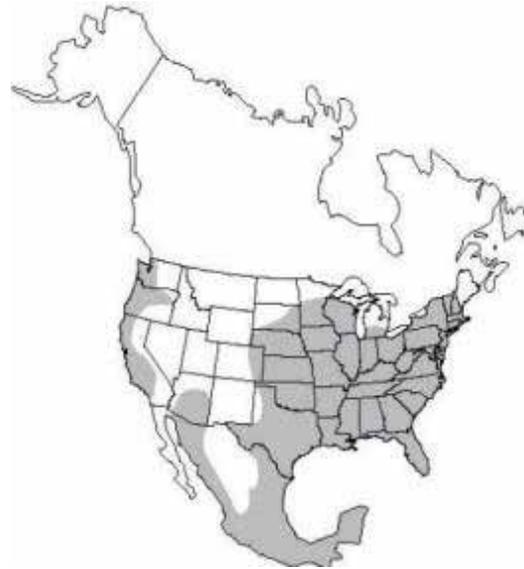
Diet:

Opossums are true omnivores and will eat everything from carrion to cockroaches. They tend to be a benefit to any area they inhabit because of their diverse diet. Their diet includes all types of bugs and insects including cockroaches, crickets and beetles. They love snails and will also eat mice and rats. Opossums may occur at higher densities in suburban areas due to the availability of water, den sites, and foods such as pet food left out at night, overripe, rotting fruit that has fallen from trees, and compost piles. They will also eat carrion, often in the form of roadkill. This fondness for roadkill can be dangerous for the opossum, as it can become roadkill itself while eating. The opossum helps keep neighborhoods clean and free of unwanted, harmful garden pests and

rodents, which may carry diseases. The opossum has earned the title of “nature’s little sanitation engineer”.

Range:

Originally native to the southeastern United States, opossums were intentionally introduced into the west during the Great Depression, probably as a source of food. Their range has been expanding steadily northwards, thanks in part to more plentiful, 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. Opossums did not occur in Rhode Island prior to the 1960’s and can now be found throughout the state, with the exception of Block Island, Prudence Island, and the smaller islands of the Narragansett Bay. Older opossums found in the northern part of their range often display shortened tails and ears due to frostbite.



Opossums occur in a wide variety of habitats, ranging from arid to moist, wooded to open fields, suburban to urban areas. Opossums prefer environments near streams or swamps, including farmlands, low, damp woodlands, and backyards. They take shelter in burrows of other animals, tree cavities, brush piles, and other cover. Opossums are both terrestrial and arboreal.

Damage Prevention:

The Rhode Island DEM Division of Fish & Wildlife receives few calls about damage done by opossums. Opossums do not dig holes and are not a threat to people or most pets. They can be a nuisance near homes where they may get into garbage, bird feeders, or pet food. Wildlife-proofing your home is always a good idea, and it may prevent other animals (ex: skunks) from taking up residence.

If there is an opossum living under your home or deck, the best thing you can do is to seal off any openings in the deck/shed/house structure. It is best to seal off these areas during the non-breeding season from October to December to avoid trapping young. Begin by locating the access hole(s) the opossum is using to get under or into your house, or under your deck. Wad up and very lightly stuff newspaper into the hole then sprinkle a layer of flour around the entrance.

Wait for the opossum to leave at night. Opossums are nocturnal and will leave shortly after sundown to hunt for food. After sundown, check frequently to see if the newspaper has been pushed out and for tracks in the flour leading away from the hole to ensure the opossum has left.

Once the opossum leaves, seal the entrance thoroughly if you cannot immediately

complete the repair at that moment. If you see tracks returning to the hole then do not seal; there is an animal in there. Seal the access hole only when you are certain there is no animal inside.

If the opossum is using a tree to access the hole, cut the branch away from the house after the opossum leaves. Opossums cannot jump so you can simply trim back the branch just enough so they can't reach by stretching. Allowing branches of trees to touch your house also gives insects, squirrels, and raccoons access to your roof area.

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.

Opossums as Disease Carriers:

Opossums carry few diseases that can infect humans. Opossums are not a likely host for the rabies virus and the chance of rabies in an opossum is EXTREMELY RARE. This may be because of the opossum's low body temperature (94-97° F), making it difficult for the virus to survive in an opossum's body.

Regulations:

Opossums are classified as a protected furbearer under Rhode Island General Law 20-16-1. Property owners, as provided under RIGL 20-16-2 may kill, by legal means, any furbearer on their own property that is killing livestock, domestic pets, damaging property or crops, provided that the carcass is made available to the RI Division of Fish and Wildlife. The relocation of any protected furbearer is prohibited. For additional information contact the RI Division of Fish and Wildlife at 401-789-0281.

Unlicensed persons cannot keep opossums as pets or try to rehabilitate them. Injured opossums must go to a licensed rehabber and no unlicensed person should attempt to handle any wild animal.

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