

Virginia Opossum

Scientific Name: *Didelphis virginiana*



Tracking Pattern

Did You Know?

- Virginia opossums are nocturnal (most active at night). They sleep during the day in a den in a hollow tree or in an abandoned rodent burrow.
- When opossums are attacked, they will "play possum," pretending that they are dead; they remain still, they do not blink, and their tongue hangs out. This act often makes the attacker lose interest in the opossum.
- The Virginia opossum is the only living marsupial from North America. It is common in the eastern USA and has spread north and west.
- The young are about the size of a bee when they are born. Females have a fur-lined pouch on their abdomen into which these tiny, under-developed young crawl.
- **Is it Opossum or just plain Possum?** Well, technically these American animals are *opossums*. Informally, most folks just call them '*possums*'. Their rather distant marsupial relatives in Australia and New Zealand are technically *possums*. Then again, Captain Cook used the term *opossum* way back in 1770 in Australia. So, the answer is yes.
- They are often mentioned in folklore and other stories, resulting in many interesting but common misconceptions. One is the belief that the male opossum breeds the female through her nose and then she sneezes the young into the pouch! This tale came about because of the unusual bifurcated (forked) penis of the male opossum.
- Opossums do not hibernate, but during very cold weather they may nest in a hollow log or abandoned burrow for several days at a time.

Chattahoochee NATURE CENTER

General Information on Virginia Opossum

IDENTIFYING CHARACTERISTICS:

The Virginia Opossum is about 2.5 feet (76 cm) long, including its foot-long, hairless, prehensile (grasping) tail. They have five toes on each foot, the “big toe” on the hind foot lacks a claw but is an opposable thumb, and a pouch for young develops during breeding season on the female. The Virginia opossum is about the size of a cat. It has two color phases — (1) grayish and (2) blackish; basal fourth or more of tail black, terminal section whitish; legs and feet blackish, toes often white or whitish.

RANGE:

The opossum is found throughout most of the eastern United States and has expanded its range to the north and to the west. It is very and is an extremely adaptable animal, often living in very close proximity to man.

HABITAT:

Its preferred habitat is forested areas, preferably close to water. Opossums are active year-round but often den up when the weather is extremely cold. They will utilize just about any sheltered location for a den including hollows in trees and fallen logs, rock cavities, brush piles, and the burrows of other animals. Denning sites are changed frequently.

NESTING:

The opossum uses its prehensile tail to bring nesting material such as leaves, grass, and other material into the den. Opossums begin breeding in late winter and early spring. Two to three litters a year are born after a gestation period of only 12 to 13 days. The young are largely undeveloped at birth except for their mouth and front legs. They crawl along a pathway licked by the mother from the genital opening to the pouch and then attach themselves to one of the teats, which usually average 13 in number. Litters often number more than the available teats. Those young failing to find a teat will perish. The young opossums remain attached to the teat for about 2 months. Not long after this, they begin to move around within the pouch and may leave the pouch briefly to climb about on the mother's back when they are around 3 months old. Eventually as they ride about on the mother's back they begin to fall off and are then left to fend for themselves.

FEEDING HABITS:

The Virginia Opossum is an omnivore (eating both plants and animals). It eats insects, lizards, mice, snails, earthworms, fruit, nuts, seeds, grasses, and carrion (dead meat that it finds, like road kill). It is a nocturnal mammal feeding on a wide variety of items including fruits, berries, and other plants, insects, earthworms, reptiles, amphibians, birds, and small mammals.