



BITS AND PIECES

NOTES FROM THE 'POSSUM LADY

Opossums: Nature's Own Pest Control

Whether rural or residential, opossums are a benefit to any area. Their diet includes insects (waterbugs, beetles, roaches, grasshoppers), plus rats, mice, moles, shrews, snakes and snails. They think slugs are a delicacy!

The reputation of the opossum as a means of controlling rats and gophers is so good, that avocado and orange growers in California are actually asking wildlife rehabilitators to release opossums into their groves. They catch and eat roof rats, but don't bother the fruit on the trees, preferring the over-ripe fruit on the ground.

Often called "Nature's Little Sanitation Engineers," they help maintain a clean and healthy environment by eating carrion and over-ripe fruit. These shy, nocturnal creatures pose no threat to humans or pets. They do not harbor diseases normally found in dogs and cats, such as rabies, distemper, parvovirus or feline hepatitis. Scientists believe the reason rabies is nearly non-existent in opossums is because of their extremely efficient immune system and a body temperature too low (about 96 degrees, F) to support the rabies virus. They are even immune to the venom of snakes with whom they share their habitat (rattle snakes, copper heads and even coral snakes).

Our only North American marsupial (pouched animal), opossums lived during the Age of the Dinosaurs. . . . fossil remains have been found from

60 million years ago! This means that your backyard opossum is one of Earth's oldest surviving mammals, virtually unchanged in 60 million years!

Typically, they go about their quiet task late at night, and you won't usually know they were around unless your dog starts barking or you happen to take a midnight stroll when one is munching slugs and insects in your yard. A special treat (and what usually attracts them to your porch) is pet food left outdoors.

Opossums, like koala bears and kangaroos, raise their young in a pouch. The young are born 13 days after the "honeymoon." They have no umbilical cord so you'll never see a 'possum with a belly button. The size of a kidney bean, they make their way into the pouch where they attach themselves to a nipple (actually swallowing it). They remain attached for about 2 1/2 months, at which time they begin to get brave and leave the pouch for short periods, riding on their mother's back. The "joeys" remain with their mother 3 to 4 months.

Opossums aren't all that dumb, either. In learning and discrimination tests, they rank higher in intelligence than dogs.

"Playing 'possum" is one of the most effective ways the opossum defends itself in the wild. When unable to flee, it will freeze and then fall into an involuntary shock-like state, drooling, rolling it's eyes back into its head and becoming stiff. This will often discourage a predator, as few will continue to pur-

sue a seemingly "dead" animal. Unfortunately, this tactic does not work on our highways. Opossums are often hit and killed by cars. In fact, most babies presented to Second Chance have been removed from a road-killed mother.

Opossums are very adaptable; able to live wherever water, food and shelter exist - in inner city underground garages and nooks and crannies (where they help control the rat population) as well as in the suburbs and country (where they help control gypsy moths).

At home in trees, it uses its prehensile tail (adapted for gripping) to help stabilize its position while climbing. It does not, however, hang by its tail despite Disney movies indicating otherwise. Interestingly, it usually climbs trees and walls straight up rather than circling a trunk in the manner of squirrels. It also runs with its tail held above the ground rather than dragging as you might expect.

At birth, the opossum is immune to a wide variety of illnesses. In addition to those diseases mentioned earlier, 'possums seldom fall victim to cancer. Oddly, at about 1 1/2 to 2 years of age, the 'possum begins to develop problems associated with geriatric humans (arthritis, osteoporosis, etc.). Their normal life span, in the wild or in captivity, is 3 to 4 years. Fortunately, their reproductive rate is high enough to insure their survival barring any gross negligence by mankind.

cont. on page 5



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