

THE POSSUM FAMILY

By Chris Montuori

Late morning, June 17, 1994, a mother opossum and her babies were spotted in a locked, parked car in downtown DC. The outside temperature was near 100 degrees; the inside of the car was an oven. Washington Humane Society staff were on the scene hoping the car owner would soon return. With Mom becoming weaker and no car owner in sight, the decision was made to break into the vehicle. Once in hand, the family was rushed to Takoma Park Animal Hospital. Thirteen babies, the maximum an opossum can nurse, were removed from Mom and given fluids by hospital and Humane Society staff. Aside from a few minor scrapes, probably from the cage, they appeared to be in pretty good shape. They weighed in at 50 to 55 grams.

Mom was another story. She was over-heated, dehydrated and very lethargic. The hospital staff gave her a vitamin injection and lots of fluids. She clearly would need some extended recovery time and I happily agreed to accept the family ('possums are my favorite mammal).

The Humane Society played taxi cab and the babies were soon settled. I turned my attention to Mom. She had a nasty scrape on her nose but was otherwise uninjured. That night, she ate a small amount of food. The evening of June 19, her babies were returned and all were soon nursing happily. The next morning, however, there was no evidence that Mom had eaten at all. A quick consultation with a fellow rehabber who specializes in opossums resulted in a treatment plan.

Sub-cutaneous fluids would be continued and an antibiotic administered. A slight modification to a ten cc syringe allowed me to hand-feed Mom chicken baby food several times a day. By June 28, Mom and babies were all doing great. The babies weighed 115 to 124 grams and Mom was doing an outstanding job caring for them.

On July 5, the 'possum family was deemed fit for release. With a heavy heart, knowing the dangers that lurked everywhere for baby 'possums, I decided to arrange their release.

But wait! Fate tossed in a little twist to the story. Early morning July 8, a woman found a mother opossum hit and killed by a car. In her pouch were three babies. I groaned when I saw them. They weighed between 9.7 and 12.5 grams. A triple-A battery weighs 11 grams. Baby opossums smaller than 15 grams cannot be successfully hand-raised. Did Mom still have enough milk? Would she accept three strangers? The alternative was to euthanize the new babies. Holding Mom, I carefully placed the newcomers into the pouch and crossed my fingers. Mom seemed not to notice that her brood had increased. Her babies were being weaned and were never nursing at the same time so there were spare nipples. The question was, did Mom have enough milk and was it of adequate composition to nourish the new babies.

Regrettably, one foster baby, the smallest, just could not manage. The other two stayed with their foster mother until their eyes were beginning to open. By then, the original 13 were so big that it was not easy to tell Mom from babies at a quick glance. Weighing 27.2 and 31.9 grams, the two foster babies were removed and transferred to the opossum specialist mentioned earlier.

A quick call to Park Ranger Christopher Lea and permission was granted to release the 'Possum family along the C&O Canal. The location was ideal: remote from people and highways with water and woods for cover. On July 28, Mom and her 13 babies were given their second chance to live wild and free.



The "Possum family. If you look closely, all thirteen babies can be counted.

P.S. The two surviving foster babies did well and were both later released.

P.P.S. The owner of the car ultimately came forward. He had trapped the mother because she was killing his ducks. I do not know whether he had intended that she die in his car or was planning to release her somewhere else. It is not likely she will come across domestic ducks or chickens in her new home.

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