

THE POSSUM FAMILY – TAKE TWO

By Chris Montuori

It is a rare occasion for a wildlife rehabilitator to receive baby opossums with a live and savable mother. In June 1994, I had the pleasure of treating a mother opossum and watching her care for her 13 babies. On July 20, 1995, it was a case of déjà vu.

When I saw the Montgomery County Animal Control van in my driveway, I walked out to see what new adventure waited. I was deep into baby bird season and the sight of a container full of baby opossums was not the one I wanted to see. The, the driver uncovered the other cage. There sat Mom in all her great and white glory. This will not be so hard after all, I thought, as I inquired about her condition.

The mother had been found caught in some sort of wire, like support cage for a tomato plant, Somehow, her pouch had been snagged on the wire and she was unable to get free. In fact, Animal Control had to cut the wire to get Mom loose. Eleven babies had been removed from Mom but Animal Control felt at least one baby was still attached. They were right.

The babies all seemed fine. Fortunately, they were old enough that they did not require the very specialized environment of a closed pouch. They were well-furred and their eyes had recently opened. Though possibly eating a few crumbs from Mom's meals, they were clearly still dependent on Mother's milk.

Though perhaps a bit dehydrated, Mom appeared to be in pretty good shape. Alert and active, there was no evidence of discomfort. Wildlife is truly amazing! Mom's pouch was torn from its opening mid-belly to the groin where the tear branched on either side like an inverted Y. This would surely take skilled veterinary care to close. Next morning, Mom went to see Dr. Mickie Greco at Wheaton Animal Hospital. Sewed up nest and tidy, Mom returned home that evening. A lot of tissue had been damaged and Dr. Greco was not sure if the sutures would hold. Antibiotics were started and I was told to keep an eye on the wound. I should have kept the babies separate but, with little time available for hand-feeding mammals, I decided to chance re-uniting the family.

The next morning, poor Mom was literally coming apart at the seams. More drastic measures were needed is Mom was to have an opportunity to heal. As I have often done in the past, I called my friend and 'possum expert, Janice Hughlett in Baltimore. Because of the extensive tissue damage, we were not sure Mom's pouch could be saved. "Was it possible," I asked, "to spay an opossum?" If released without a pouch, Mom would continue to breed but all the babies would be doomed. Janice assured me that 'possums could be spayed and she would gladly send me instructions on the procedure. She was also willing to take to babies for hand-raising.

On July 28, all twelve babies were transferred to Janice> if Mom recovered quickly enough, perhaps she could rejoin her babies. If not, the babies were in competent hands. Mom's second surgery was scheduled for August 3. Prior to spaying Mom, Dr. Greco consulted with Dr. Hennes, a 'possum expert in California. Dr. Hennes pointed out that the opossum pouch was very elastic and suggested the pouch could be saved, if at all possible. Dr. Greco agreed to do her best.

When Mom returned to SCWC that evening, the wound looked good except for one small spot low on the right groin. A quick phone call to Dr. Greco and we decided to allow the rest of the wound to heal before trying to repair the final, stubborn spot.

By August 31, everything was healing well and Mom returned to Wheaton Animal Hospital once more to close the problem area. Two weeks later, volunteer Cathy Geer helped remove the final sutures. Not only had the pouch healed, it was once again fully furred. No one would guess, looking at the fine, FAT, grey and white beauty, that she had suffered such an extensive injury. September 18, I contacted my friend Phil Ardizzone to arrange for Mom's release. Phil owns and operates AT&R Trapping Service. He specializes in the humane removal of wildlife and has often brought his "quarry" to me for care if the animal was too young or compromised to simply relocate. I knew he would know of a safe release site for Mom. That very afternoon, Phil arrived and returned Mom to her natural habitat. Janice reported that the babies had done fine and had also been released.

With just a little luck, she and her babies will help assure that these fascinating creatures will continue to enrich our planet for another 60 million years.

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