

Opossums, nature's sanitation engineers  
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We've all heard the expression "playing possum." But do opossums really play dead when they are threatened? The answer is a resounding yes! When the opossum senses danger of any kind they will mimic the appearance and even smell of a dead animal. Oddly enough, the physiological response to danger is an unconscious act (like sneezing). When opossums play dead their lips are drawn back, teeth bared, and saliva forms around their mouths. Their eyes will close or partially close and a foul odor will secrete from the glands. Even if poked, prodded, moved, or turned over, the animal will remain stiff and will not react. In reality the animal is unconscious and once the danger is over will regain consciousness after about 40 minutes to four hours.

Opossums are North America's only marsupials, which mean they are a member of the order Didelphimorphia and have a pouch. They are related to the kangaroo and koala bear. They are relatively solitary and nomadic and are on the move constantly in search of food and water. Their sense of hearing and smell is excellent but they have very poor eyesight.

Opossums have the ability to survive most anywhere and are very successful colonizers. They are generally about the size of a house cat. Their bodies are from 15 to 20 inches long with a tail 9 to 20 inches. They have a cone-shaped head and a pointed snout. Usually they are gray in color and have a scaly tail, which they use as a hand to latch onto things. They sport opposable thumbs and will grasp small branches and objects with them as well. They have a mouth full of about 50 teeth and feed on most anything. They eat bird eggs, chickens, moles, worms, bugs, snakes, grass, fruit, carrion and garbage.

Opossums can live just about anywhere and have been seen in forests, grasslands, farms and cities. They are active at night and rest during the heat of the day. They seek shelter anywhere that is convenient such as a hollow log, culvert, gopher tortoise burrow or an attic. They are solitary, reclusive critters and are, for the most part, defenseless. Because they do not move very quickly, predators may make an easy meal of opossums. Sometimes, they will try to defend themselves by growling or raising their pitch. Males make a clicking noise when looking for a mate. Young opossums may make a sneezing sound to signal their mother if they feel frightened. If the babies feel threatened they will make a hissing sound.

The female gives birth twice a year to as many as 25 babies. They are so small when they are born that about 10 of them could fit into a teaspoon. Unfortunately, only the 13 babies that can attach to the mother's nipples for milk can survive. The young remain in her pouch until they are able to walk, which can be from 70 to 125 days. At about two months, they may venture out of the safe, warm pouch and make their way onto mom's back and hang on to her fur. The opossum has a very short life span and most live only two to four years.

Although opossums have somewhat of a bad reputation, they are very non-aggressive animals. They may get into garbage cans and cause a mess, but this habit is easily stopped by tight fitting lids. Opossums help maintain a healthy environment by eating cockroaches, rats and mice.

They will also eat dead animals and overripe fruit that have fallen to the ground. Some folks have gone as far as deeming them “Nature’s Little Sanitation Engineers.”

Some opossum facts:

- They lived during the Mesozoic Era in the late Cretaceous period.
- Adults weight about 5 – 15 lbs, while newborns are about the size of a honey bee.
- They can swim.
- They are excellent climbers, using their hands, feet and tail to grasp.
- Both males and females build the nests.
- Young opossums can hang upside down by their tails, but only for a short period of time.
- They are immune to the venom of rattlesnakes, copperheads and water moccasins.
- They do not gnaw or chew on things or dig up gardens.
- They are hardy creatures and often recover from injury.
- They have 52 teeth – more than any other mammal in North America.