

BEST PRACTICES



Opossum...possum (*Didelphidae* family)

Marsupials on the Move

Opossum's are marsupials (pouched mammals) and not of the rodent family, despite its rodent like tail and pointy nose. They are the only marsupial in North America. Marsupials are a primitive group of mammals that carry their young in a front belly pouch where the joeys nurse and further develop.

Opossums are related to other marsupials more commonly found in Australia such as kangaroos and koalas. Until the 1900's opossums were only found in the southeastern United States and in Central America where they

originated. Opossums first arrived in Washington state as pets and novelties and since then, their range has greatly expanded as these animals are highly adaptable.



Nighttime Munchers

Opossums are nocturnal, foraging up to two miles in search of food each night. They are primarily solitary animals except during the breeding season or if a female has young. Opossums are omnivores and scavengers preferring fruit, grain and insects. In the wild they will eat invertebrates, small mammals, amphibians, reptiles, ground nesting birds and eggs. In the urban areas they are beneficial as they feed upon rodents, carrion, slugs, and snails. (Although they may raid your compost pile if uncovered.) Like all wildlife, they are affected by human actions that pollute our waterways.

Rabies Resistant

Oddly enough, opossums have a natural resistance to rabies. They rarely contract the disease and are therefore even less likely to transmit it. They are also fastidious groomers, ridding themselves of ticks helping with their control.

Playing Dead

Although they are good climbers and swimmers, they are not fast runners and will employ a unique defensive mechanism. When they are threatened, an opossum will hiss and bare its teeth or try to escape. If attacked, it will

play dead until the danger has passed. Opossums are not dangerous and are only a nuisance if human actions permit them to be.

To prevent these animals from being a nuisance:

- n Do not feed them!
- n Feed pets inside or pick up food bowls. Do not leave pet food out where other animals have access.
- n Secure your garbage with a tight-fitting lid.
- n Do not put food in compost areas. Securely cover your compost.
- n Clean barbecue grills and grease traps.
- n Eliminate denning areas by closing potential entry areas.

For more information, visit wdfw.wa.gov/species-habitats/species/didelphis-virginianus.

Source: Stream Team News, Spring 2021