

OPOSSUM

Seventy million years ago our only living native marsupial looked just the same as it does today. (Marsupials are animals with a pouch for their young, like a kangaroo.) Although hunted quite extensively, it has always held its own and has increased its range considerably since it was first named the Virginia Opossum by the early settlers. The opossum is not native to the west coast. It was introduced into California and Oregon in 1890 and is now found from Southern California to Canada.

It is a very adaptable animal, it doesn't mind where it sleeps or what it eats and is quite happy to live close to man. Under a shed makes a fine home, or a hollow tree, or under some rocks.

The young are born before they are fully developed, after a gestation period of only twelve days and a few hours, and make their way to the mother's pouch to continue their growth. The baby is hairless, about two thirds the size of a honeybee, and weighs 1/175 of an ounce. Sixteen to twenty will fit into a tablespoon.

The mother opossum licks the babies clean and licks a path for them through her fur to her pouch. That's all the help she gives. The babies have specially formed front limbs with tiny hooks that allow them to climb only upward. About twenty-two babies are born and usually about eight or nine make it to the pouch.

There are thirteen nipples in the mother's pouch and they are not shareable. If more than thirteen young arrive safely, the late comers will not survive. The baby opossum has strong muscles on the sides of the mouth that enable it to cling tightly to the nipple. So tightly that it cannot be dislodged. There its development continues. After sixty days a fine fur has grown and the eyes have opened. At this stage the baby will sometimes venture out to ride on its mother's back. In another thirty days it weighs 8 ounces and can forage for itself. By the time it is fully grown an opossum will have increased its birth weight 8,400 times! Man increases his 20 times.

The opossum is a very good climber with strong claws for gripping and a long, scaly tail. The tail is very useful. The opossum can curl up the end to carry grass for its bed and a young opossum can hang upside down from a branch by its tail, adults are too heavy.

It has an acute sense of smell and very good hearing; it wiggles its ears to find out where a sound is coming from.

One defense mechanism used by the opossum is to "play dead". The animal is not just acting, the whole metabolic system slows down and a sort of coma results. The body becomes flaccid, like a rag doll, and the opossum can be moved around, even injured, without showing signs of life. This is quite a good response to danger from predators that chase their prey but is not too effective against cars.

In spite of being so well adapted and such a good survivor, the opossum is not very bright. It has a very small brain. Using beans to measure the volume, the size of its brain case was once compared with the raccoon, an animal of about the same size. It took 150 beans to fill the brain case of a raccoon and only 21 to fill the opossum's.



Virginia or Common Opossum (*Didelphis marsupialis*)