

# West Virginia Wildlife Series

---

## *A Guide to Mammals of West Virginia*

### **Virginia Opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*)**



Volume 12

## **Characteristics:**

Virginia opossums are marsupials. An opossum is a whitish or grayish mammal about the size of a house cat. The underfur is dense with sparse guard hairs. Its face is long and pointed its ears rounded and hairless. Maximum length is 40 inches; the ratlike tail is slightly less than half the total length. The tail may be unusually short in northern opossums due to loss by frostbite. Opossums may weigh as much as 14 pounds; males average 6 to 7 pounds and females average 4 pounds. The skull is usually 3 to 4 inches long and contains 50 teeth — more than is found in any other North American mammal. Canine teeth (fangs) are prominent. Tracks of both front and hind feet look as if they were made by little hands with widely spread fingers (Fig. 2). They may be distinguished from raccoon tracks, in which hind prints appear to be made by little feet. The hind foot of an opossum looks like a distorted hand.

## **Range:**

Opossums are found in eastern, central, and west coast states. Since 1900 they have expanded their range northward in the eastern United States. They are absent from the Rockies, most western plains states, and parts of the northern United States. Its home range is usually about 25 acres, but at times it wanders up to 60 acres.

## **Habitat:**

Habitats are diverse, ranging from arid to moist, wooded to open fields. Opossums prefer environments near streams or swamps. They take shelter in burrows of other animals, tree cavities, brush piles, and other cover. They sometimes den in attics and garages where they may make a messy nest.

## Diet:

Foods preferred by opossums are animal matter, mainly insects or carrion. Opossums also eat considerable amounts of vegetable matter, especially fruits and grains. Opossums living near people may visit compost piles, garbage cans, or food dishes intended for dogs, cats, and other pets.

## Omnivores:

Some animals eat both plants and animals. They are **omnivores**. Omnivores include mammals like [grizzly bear](#), [striped skunk](#) and [raccoon](#) and birds like the crow, the [blue jay](#) and the woodpecker. Because they will eat plants and animals, omnivores survive well in many environments. Some omnivores, like the [raccoon](#), the [opossum](#) and the seagull have no problem adapting to living near humans. They often will dig through garbage cans, dumpsters and gardens to find food.

What did you have to eat today? If you are like most humans, you probably had meat and plants! Humans are omnivores too! Our teeth are designed to eat both meat and plants. Our front teeth help us rip into meat and bite into fruits and vegetables, and our molars help us grind up meat and chew fruits and vegetables. Many omnivorous animals also have teeth that help them eat both plants and animals.



### **Diseases common to Opossum:**

An opossum is a host to a multitude of internal and external parasites including intestinal worms, fleas and ticks. These generally are debilitating and increase susceptibility to diseases and malnutrition. An opossum is highly resistant to rabies.



### **Opossum communication:**

When attacked more often, an opossum tries to bluff its attacker by hissing, screeching, salivating, opening its mouth wide to show all of its 50 teeth, and sometimes excreting a greenish substance. Many of these behaviors occur in encounters between males. Clicks, used in aggressive displays by males during mating season, are also employed in communications between mother and young.

### **Life Cycle:**

Opossums usually live alone, having a home range of 10 to 50 acres. Young appear to roam randomly until they find a suitable home range. Usually they are active only at night. The mating season is January to July in warmer parts of the range but may start a month later and end a month earlier in northern areas. Opossums



may raise 2, rarely 3, litters per year. The opossum is the only marsupial in North America. Like other marsupials, the blind, helpless young develop in a pouch. They are born 13 days after mating. The young, only 1/2 inch long, find their way into the female's pouch where they each attach to one of 13 teats. An average of 7 young is born. They remain in the pouch for 7 to 8 weeks. The young remain with the mother another 6 to 7 weeks until weaned.

Most young die during their first year. Those surviving until spring will breed in that first year. The maximum age in the wild is about 7 years.

Although opossums have a top running speed of only 7 miles per hour, they are well equipped to escape enemies. They readily enter burrows and climb trees.

**Behavior:**

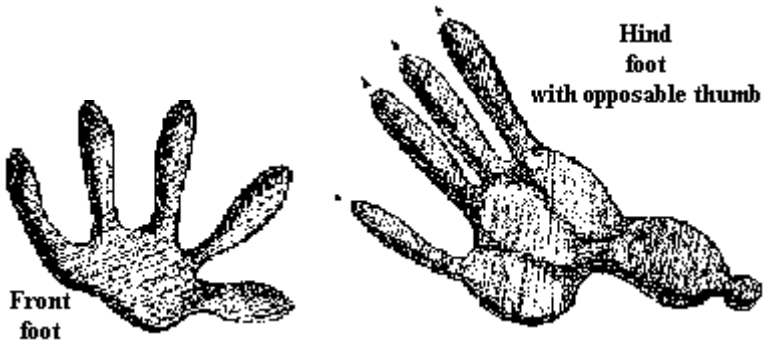
When threatened, an opossum may bare its teeth, growl, hiss, bite, screech, and exude a smelly, greenish fluid from its anal glands. If these defenses are not successful, an opossum may play dead.

When captured or surprised during daylight, opossums appear stupid and inhibited. They are surprisingly intelligent, however. They rank above dogs in some learning and discrimination tests.

**Identifying Opossum scat:**

Opossum scat is segmented, 1 to 2 inches long and about  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch in diameter. Segments often connected by fur or plant fibers, black to brown in color and often with berry seeds in evidence.

## Opossum Tracks:



In some trail patterns, the two tracks, front and hind, overlap each other. Because the tracks are doubled, the trail can look like that of a much larger animal.

Early morning is the best time to find their tracks. The trails in fine, dry soil tend to age quickly, especially along riparian areas. Opossums can be found in many environments, including cities and wilderness. They are opportunistic feeders and can utilize many of the scraps people throw away, thus they are often found raiding pet food dishes and garbage cans. Their tracks show five toes on the front foot and five toes on the rear, including the opposable thumb. The thumb lacks a claw.

Number of toes: 5 front - 5 rear

Front Foot: 1  $\frac{7}{8}$  in L x 2 in W

Rear Foot: 2  $\frac{1}{2}$  in L x 2  $\frac{1}{4}$  in W

Straddle: 3.2 - 4.2 in

Trail Width: 6 in

Slow Stride: 7 - 10 in

Running Stride: 10 - 15 in

This series of Wildlife guides has been compiled and edited by Bill Church.

Copyright: 2008

