

Opossum Fact Sheet

INTRODUCTION

The Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*), or “opossum” as it is commonly known, is a native mammal in Georgia. Many people are familiar with opossums, but there are several aspects of the opossum with which people are unfamiliar.

DESCRIPTION

The opossum is about the size of a house cat with adult males weighing an average of 5.5 pounds and adult females an average of 4.0 pounds. They have long, dense body fur that is usually a grayish white color, although some opossums in the southeastern U.S. are darker. An opossum's face is white with a pointed snout and whiskers. An adult opossum has 50 teeth, quite a lot, and is not afraid to bare them when scared or angry (hence the phrase “grinning like a opossum”). Its tail is about a foot long and has very little hair on it. The tail is prehensile which means it is can be used to grasp onto objects such as tree limbs.

RANGE AND HABITAT

Opossums are fairly widespread in continental North America, found as far north as the U.S./Canadian border and as far south as Costa Rica. In the United States, opossums are found in the eastern two-thirds of the country and along a narrow strip on the Pacific coasts of California, Oregon, and Washington. This west coast population is a result of human introduction, and thus is not a native population.

Opossums are not constrained to any specific habitat type, thus they are found in many different areas from cities and towns to rural areas. However, across their range they appear to be most numerous in wooded areas adjacent to water bodies such as creeks, rivers, and lakes.

Opossums are not territorial animals, but do maintain seasonal home ranges (the area typically traversed by an animal over a given time). Adult males have a home range of about 350 acres (increasing to around 785 during breeding season) and adult females usually range over about 160 acres during a given year. Since they are not territorial, individual home ranges often overlap with others.

BIOLOGY AND LIFE HISTORY

Unique among North American mammals, opossums belong to the mammalian subclass known as marsupials. Breeding occurs in midwinter, and tiny (0.1 inch) young are born after a brief gestation period of 12 days. Remarkably, the young climb into a pouch located on the female's abdomen. In the pouch, female opossums suckle and shelter their newborn young for almost 70 days. Being fed milk in the warm cozy environment of the pouch, the young fully develop. The young are completely weaned at about 100 days after entering their mother's pouch. Average litter size is seven and adult female opossums have an average of two litters each year.

On average, opossums can be expected to live about two years at best, with a substantial percentage dying before their first full year. Major causes of mortality include predators such as coyotes,

dogs, bobcats, foxes, raccoons, and raptors, as well as human caused mortality through hunting, trapping, and vehicle strikes.

Opossums are subject to a variety of diseases, though interestingly, rabies is exceedingly rare. Opossums are omnivorous, meaning they eat both plant and animal substances. They eat hard and soft mast: acorns, berries, and other fruits. Opossums consume insects and other arthropods, as well as bird eggs, bird nestlings, and small mammals. They have even been known to kill and eat venomous snakes (opossums are remarkably immune to snake venom). Carrion (dead animals), garbage, and even young of their own species round out an opossum's diet.

Many people have heard of opossums “playing dead”. This unusual behavior is thought to have evolved as a defense mechanism against predators that seek out live prey. By lying still and feigning death in the face of perceived danger, perhaps the opossum is banking on being passed by rather than eaten.

SPORT AND ECONOMIC VALUE

In Georgia and many other states opossums are considered a game animal and thus have regulations pertaining to their harvest through hunting and trapping. In Georgia during the 2002-03 hunting season, an estimated 2,400 hunters harvested approximately 12,700 opossums. During the same season, Georgia trappers harvested approximately 3,800 opossums. The overall Georgia opossum population is unknown, but most biologists believe that the hunting and trapping harvest is a very small percentage of the overall population.

Opossums were the third most trapped furbearer in Georgia during the 2002-03 trapping season behind raccoons and beaver, respectively. Nationally, from 1970-71 through 1994-95, opossums were the fourth most important furbearer in terms of trapper harvest (behind muskrat, raccoon, and nutria, in that order). When properly prepared, possums make for excellent table fare and were once commonly eaten. They can be cleaned by skinning, or by scalding and scraping in a manor similar to cleaning a domestic hog. The meat is white and succulent and can be cooked like a pork roast with potatoes, carrots and onions to round out the flavor.

NUISANCE

Opossums are known to get into garbage and pet food that has been left outside. They can easily climb stairs to get these items on porches and decks. Opossums also target bird feeders. The key to preventing these types of situations is to secure or remove the attractant or food source. Opossums are known to kill and eat poultry and small game birds thus causing economic losses. Live traps (cages) and foot hold traps are the most commonly used to trap opossums. Compared to some other furbearers, they are relatively easy to trap.