

# Opossum

*Didelphia virginiana*



## Key features

- The Virginia opossum has a long snout and grayish white, black or even sometimes white fur.
- 8.8 to 13.2 lbs. (4 to 6 kg) about the size of a large cat.
- They tend to be semi-arboreal omnivores
- They are **marsupials** which means the females have a pouch.
- The hind feet have an opposable digit with no claw.
- Opossums have naked prehensile tails used for carrying or balancing. They do not hang from their tails any more than a few seconds, the tail cannot support their weight.

## Habitat

- Virginia opossums (*Didelphis virginiana*) have an expanding range throughout Central and North American. Currently, Virginia opossums can be found from Costa Rica to southern Ontario, Canada. In the United States they are found east of the Rocky Mountains and along the west coast.
- The Virginia opossum lives in a wide-variety of habitats including deciduous forests, open woods and farmland. It tends to prefer wet areas like marshes, swamps and streams.



An opossum carrying leaves with its tail.

## Diet

- They are nocturnal and use its keen sense of smell to locate food.
- The opossum is omnivorous and eats fruits, snakes (opossums are immune to all types of snake venom, except that of the coral snake), insects, snails, slugs, eggs, mice, rats, fish, frogs, crayfish, and carrion. If for no other reason than pest control, opossums are great to have around!

## Young

- The gestation period for female opossums lasts approximately two weeks.
- This is common among marsupials, as the young do the most of their developing outside the womb.
- A litter of opossums is generally between 10 and 20 infants. These newborns are about the size of a honeybee—and without fur, sight or hearing.
- Approximately half of all birthed opossums will survive. Immediately after their birth, newborn opossums travel from the birth canal to their mother's pouch, where they will begin nursing, if a teat is available to them, and continue developing.
- Opossum infants will continue to live in their mother's pouch for about 2 months after birth, during which time they are attached full-time to a teat. As the opossums grow and their senses develop, they will begin to venture outside the pouch for short periods.
- Eventually the young become too large to stay in the pouch and will spend their time instead on their mother's back, using their opposable thumbs to grasp her fur while she travels.
- Most young opossums spend about 3 to 4 months with their mothers before they are fully weaned and independent.



## Interesting facts

- The word opossum was first used for the Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) only.
- The first opossums are believed to have developed in South America during the late Cretaceous or early Paleocene. They didn't spread to North America until the Central American land bridge was formed. **The Virginia opossum is the only North American marsupial.**
- Opossums are nearly immune to rabies and eight times less likely to carry rabies compared to wild dogs.
- Opossums also show partial or total immunity to the venom produced by rattlesnakes, cottonmouths, and other pit vipers.
- If you find opossums in your neighborhood, there is no need to be alarmed. They are not rats and they will not infect you with bubonic plague.
- The Virginia Opossum is today gradually extending its range northwards and can today be found as far north as Ontario and Toronto in Canada.
- The reason behind its successful spread is believed to be a combination of man-made factors. Human dwellings, including sheds and garages, are providing the opossums with reasonably warm "burrows" in which they can seek shelter during the cold season, the presence of garbage, pet food/bird food and road kill makes it possible to find food even during the harshest winter months, and human activities have also created a greater abundance of freshwater sources. Global warming leading to milder winters may also benefit the opossum in the northernmost part of its range

## About our opossum "Lily"

- ✚ Lily came to us in April of 2017 with her 5 brothers. A person saw a dead opossum on the road and stopped to check to see if it was a female with babies. It is not unusual for people to do this if they are knowledgeable about this animal.
- ✚ Sure enough there were some babies who were still alive. They were raised by a wildlife rehabber to be released. When it was found out that they had a genetic bone disorder called "legg Perthes" it was determined that they would not survive in the wild. They were distributed to other educational facilities and we kept the female known as Lily.
- ✚ You can see Lily in our Animal room, and sometimes taking a walk with her caregivers. Stop by and visit Lily.
- ✚ If you would like to assist in the care of Lily you can support her through our **Be A Buddy** program. She will love you for it.

