



Virginia Opossum

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Photo: USFWS

Virginia Opossum

(*Didelphis virginiana*)

The Virginia opossum is a unique animal in North Carolina. In 1612, the English explorer, John Smith, described it as having the head of a pig, a tail of a rat, and being the size of a cat with baggage under her belly where she carries and suckles her young. The opossum is the only native marsupial (mammal with a pouch) in the United States, with traits and adaptations not found in other U.S. mammals.

Description

The Virginia opossum is a small mammal about the size of a house cat with a long, pointed nose, black hairless ears, dark eyes and a nearly hairless tail adapted to grasping objects (called “prehensile”). The opossum is adept at climbing, running and swimming at a relatively slow and deliberate pace. Each foot has five digits with all but the first digit on the hind foot having claws. The first digit of the hind foot is opposable and functions like the human thumb, enabling the opossum to grasp objects while climbing. Fur coloration ranges from light gray to nearly black, with most individuals exhibiting light underfur with black guard hairs. The Virginia opossum has a total of 50 teeth, more than any other North American mammal.

History and Status

The Virginia opossum has been present in North Carolina since the Pleistocene period, and it probably evolved from the common opossum, *Didelphis marsupialis*, which is still present in Mexico and Central America. Populations of this common mammal have remained stable or increased for many years. Opossums have adapted rather well to human development and do well in urban environments.

The Virginia opossum is classified as a game and furbearer animal in North Carolina. The regulated harvest of these animals does not have a significant impact on their populations. For more information on this species, including status and any applicable regulations, visit www.ncwildlife.org/opossum.

Habitats & Habits

Opossums inhabit a wide range, from sea level to elevations over 10,000 feet. Although they prefer deciduous woodlands with streams, they use all habitats within their range. They are well-adapted to arboreal and terrestrial habitats, and are found in the highest densities where concentrated food sources occur.

Opossums are primarily nocturnal and generally spend the daylight hours in a den or abandoned squirrel nest. Although opossums do not hibernate, they may remain in a den during short periods of extremely cold weather.

The Virginia opossum is the only marsupial native to the United States.



Photo: USFWS

Range and Distribution

The Virginia opossum is the only native marsupial north of Mexico, and it occurs from southern Ontario and British Columbia, Canada, through much of the United States and Mexico to northwestern Costa Rica. It is present throughout North Carolina. Virginia opossums have extended their range northward in recent history and continue to do so through natural migration and introductions by man. All of the populations west of the Rocky Mountains are the result of introductions by man.



■ Virginia opossum range

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Opossums are solitary, except during the mating season. Unlike other mammals, the gestation period is very short, resulting in embryonic young that must pull themselves with their forelimbs to the marsupium, or pouch, where they must attach themselves to a nipple in order to survive.

Though litter size ranges from one to 15 young, typically only 4 to 7 successfully reach the pouch. The young remain attached to a nipple inside the pouch and at about 55 days, they are about the size of a house mouse, can open their mouths and may crawl out of the pouch for short periods. Until they are about 85 days old, the young either travel with the mother in the pouch or on her back. When the young are approximately 100 days old, they are weaned and will leave the mother and litter mates and disperse on their own. When born, young opossums weigh 0.13 grams and increase a thousand times in 100 days to 130 grams.

Most people are familiar with the phrase “playing possum” derived from the opossum’s habit of feigning death when approached by a potential predator. When threatened, an opossum will first face the predator with its mouth open and hiss or growl. If a predator grabs and shakes the opossum, the opossum will feign death while defecating and emitting a foul-smelling greenish substance from its anal glands. This behavior frequently causes the predator to release the opossum and leave it alone. Opossums are resistant to the venom of our more common venomous snakes and they can feed on copperheads, rattlesnakes and cottonmouth snakes with minimal risk of injury or death from the venom.

Human Interactions

Due to the opossum’s unusual appearance, many people have misconceptions about opossums and don’t realize the many benefits opossums can provide to the ecosystem. Studies have shown they can eat 1,000s of ticks in a week and that they will also eat cockroaches, snails, slugs, snakes, rats and mice. Opossums will occasionally break into chicken houses to eat eggs or young chicks, and they often raid garbage cans if access is available. The most frequent interaction that people have with opossums in North Carolina is on the road, and more opossums are killed by vehicles than hunting and trapping.

NCWRC Spotlight

The NCWRC tracks harvest of the Virginia opossum through the annual trapper harvest survey and fur buyer reports of annual pelt purchases.

Reference/Credits

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- Novak, M., J.A. Baker, M.E. Obbard, and B. Malloch, editors. 1987. Wild Furbearer Management and Conservation in North America. Ontario Trappers Association, Ontario, Canada.
- Written by Geriann Albers, Colleen Olfenbuttel, and Perry W. Sumner, NCWRC; updated 2018.



Playing dead (Photo: Tamala Owens)

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Mammalia
Order: Didelphimorphia

Average Size

Length: 21 to 36 in.; Height: 6 to 10 in.
Weight: 4 to 15 lbs.

Food

The opossum is an omnivore, eating insects, worms, fruit, leaves, small mammals, young birds, acorns, snails, snakes, slugs, lizards, bird eggs, young rabbits, carrion, maggots, spiders, frogs, toads, crayfish and garbage.

Breeding/Young

Opossums are sexually mature from 6 months to 1 year old, and can breed twice yearly from January to October. Gestation is estimated at only 12-13 days, resulting in embryonic young that rely on the pouch as their second womb. Successful litter size ranges from 4 to 7. The young are weaned at approximately 100 days old.

Life Expectancy

Average 1 to 2 years, few live longer than 4 years in the wild.



Female opossum carrying young (Photo: Wikimedia)