



Figure 1. Courtesy of <http://northamericannature.com/>

### **“Virginia Oposum aka Possum”**

**Prepared by Dr. John V. Richardson Jr, Ecological Informatician**

Didelphis Virginiana

Didelphidae, Family; Didelphimorphia, Order; IUCN 3.1: “Least Concern”  
(Name, date)

**Etymology:** “The word “opossum” is borrowed from the Powhatan language and was first recorded between 1607 and 1611 by John Smith (as opassom) and William Strachey (as aposoum). “Possum”...“white dog or dog-like animal.”

**Description/Field Marks:** Fur is mostly gray in color. Long thin snout; pink nose. Long thin, hairless, prehensile rat-like tail.

**Voice:** Sneezing sounds as joeys. Clicking and hissing when threatened. Growling when looking for mates. Some purr.

**Male/Female:** “Females have two vaginal tracts and two uteri, and males in turn have a forked or [bifurcated penis](#).” Females have 13 teats. Males are slightly larger and weigh more.

**Diet:** They have 50 teeth. [Carnivores, omnivores, or scavengers]. Snakes and “will also hunt [birds](#), [mice](#), worms, [snakes](#), [insects](#), and even [chickens](#).” “Their diet includes all types of bugs and insects including cockroaches, crickets and beetles. They love snails.”

**Courting Displays:** “Mid-winter through mid-summer.” “The average estrous cycle of the opossum is about 28 days. For daytime courting behavior, see the video at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJLnZy6xUIE&ab\\_channel=izjustagirl](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VJLnZy6xUIE&ab_channel=izjustagirl) starting at 2:00.

**Nesting:** Tend to live in underground dens or nests, especially “dens left by other animals, crevices in trees, attics, and garages.” Sleeping during the day “in a hollow tree or in an abandoned rodent burrow.”

**Pouch:** A single litter can be up to 20-25, but 13 is common because that’s the number of mother’s teats. Six is the average size. Immediately after birth, they crawl into pouch.

**Early Life:** 11–13-day gestation after mating. New born is the size of a honeybee. Shortly after birth, they move into pouch. Joeys live in mother’s pouch. “Only around half of the opossums make it out of the pouch.” Independent after three months; “maturity at six months for females and eight months for males.” “They generally have larger litters to increase the chances of survival and invest little resources into parenting.”

**Behavior:** Nocturnal. Solitary and nomadic. However, we have seen them in our backyard in late afternoon (5:30 in June).

**Habitat/Local Sites:** “In the winter, these marsupials tend to stay put in more permanent nesting sites...Although they’re not considered arboreal marsupials (which live in trees), they are excellent tree climbers and spend plenty of time up in canopies.” Urban backyards where they will eat cat food.

**Home Range/Territory:** “The home range of an opossum is about 50 acres. They are not territorial to the extent that they defend their ranges from other opossums. Many opossum ranges overlap, and good quality habitats may support 20 opossums to the square mile.” In Australia: “A territory may be as small as an area of about 50 metres radius from a central location and may contain a number of nesting sites.”

**Life Span:** Varying claims of 2-7 years (“In captivity, the oldest recorded opossum was four years and five months old”), but average is 1-2 years in the wild due to predators including birds, cats, coyotes, and dogs. Humans are the apex predator.

**Did you Know:** A group of possums is called a passel. If you find a dead possum, "check her pouch for infants." Their nickname: "Nature's Little Sanitation Engineer" and "When threatened, **opossums** run, growl, belch, urinate and defecate,"

**Citations:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia\\_opossum](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Virginia_opossum) has "references."

**Other References:** <https://opossumsocietyus.org/general-opossum-information/>

**FIELD NOTES:** 2 "babies" in April 2021.

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