



Oregon Sea Grant Extension  
Sustainable Tourism &  
Outdoor Recreation Program

# Interpretative Fact Sheet Opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*)



The following short article is from the [Oregon Coast 101 Species](#) collection used by the Guide and Outfitter Recognized Professional (GORP) training program. These articles are intended to provide interesting facts you can share with your clientele and add value to your services.

An Interpretive Fact Sheet has been written about each species. We are currently uploading these blogs and creating the links.

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# Opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*)

 [tourism.oregonstate.edu/opossum-didelphis-virginiana/](https://tourism.oregonstate.edu/opossum-didelphis-virginiana/)

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## Playing Possum....

You might have heard about 'playing possum.' Opossums will fake apparent death in order to escape a predator.

They are pretty convincing because the animal falls over and lies motionless for up to six hours! They also often release a very nauseating odor when threatened.

Opossums are not the only animal that will fake apparent death or tonic immobility. Evidently this technique is also used by fish, sharks, reptiles, rabbits, chickens, and ducks.



Opossum or possum....both bite. Photo courtesy of ODFW.

## Description

The Virginia Opossum is a cat-sized gray and white animal with a pointed nose, beady eyes, and a naked scaly tail. This mammal will reach up to 40 inches long.

This nocturnal species has several adaptations that help make it successful, including:

- Five toes and opposable thumbs on all feet make them agile climbers. Humans, gorillas, chimps, orangutans, gibbons also have opposable thumbs.
- Extra keen eyesight—they have more than twice the number of rod-to-cone ratios compared to humans (50:1 vs. 20:1). Color recognition is limited.
- They have very sensitive whiskers that assist their nocturnal movements.
- The prehensile, rat-like tail is great for grasping plant materials and bedding material.
- Females have a pouch for holding newborns similar to a kangaroo.

## Origins

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Opossums originated in South America. There are different theories about how opossums became established in the U.S. including migrations, as pets, for farming, and more.

What we do know is that this mammal is found in many parts of the U.S. and northwestern Canada. It is the only marsupial north of Mexico.

These mammals arrived in California and Oregon in the early 1920's. Opossum were also farmed for their pelts and meat (considered a substitute for rabbit and chicken).



“I’ll be back and eat anything (almost).”

Photo royalty free, unsplash.

## **Diet**

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This opportunistic omnivore will eat almost anything. Much of their diet includes scavenged foods, like carrion. Other foods often include plant materials, insects, mammals, and reptiles, fish, amphibians, and more.

Human activities have provided excellent opportunities for opossums by inadvertently providing shelter, food, and water. Recommendations for minimalizing problems include sealable waste containers, securing pet food and water inside at night, and cleaning up agricultural waste (such as dropped fruit).

## **A Pest and Friend**

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Opossums are successful colonizers and survive in a wide variety of environments. They favor dark, secure areas and are active at night for potentially nine or more hours. Typical habitats include agricultural lands, forest communities, areas with small streams, and wherever humans are.

They are an invasive species in most places, but they do have a redeeming trait. Many large opossums are immune to rattlesnake venom and will regularly prey upon these snakes.

### **Fun Facts:**

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- The word “opossum” (borrowed from the Powhatan language) was first recorded by John Smith and William Strachey between 1607 and 1611.
- Opossums are finicky groomers.
- They can be trained to use a cat box.
- The species has a tendency towards cannibalism, particularly in over-crowded conditions.
- Juveniles swing from branches with their tails.
- It is illegal to keep this species as a pet (see State regulations).
- When threatened they will growl, hiss, strike, and attempt to bite. With approximately 50 teeth, it has the ability to hurt you and your pets. If you have an infestation, call a professional.

### **REFERENCES:**

- Oregon Dept. of Fish & Wildlife (<https://myodfw.com/wildlife-viewing/species/virginia-opossum> and <https://myodfw.com/articles/furbearer-trapping-and-hunting>)
- LafeberVet (<https://lafeber.com/vet/basic-information-sheet-virginia-opossum/>)
- Wikipedia, Apparent death and Opossum ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apparent\\_death](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apparent_death) and <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Opossum>)