

## Amazing Opossum Facts



The opossum is North America's only marsupial, giving birth to 7-21 tiny, embryonic young. These newborns instinctively climb upward into the mother's pouch, where they firmly attach themselves to one of 13 teats and nurse for the next 50 days.



Newborn opossums are so tiny, it takes 20 of them to equal the weight of a penny.



The opossum has a **prehensile** tail--a tail capable of grasping and holding objects. While an opossum does not sleep hanging by its tail (as many cartoons portray!), it does use its tail to grasp objects as it climbs.



Opossums are immune to rattlesnake venom.

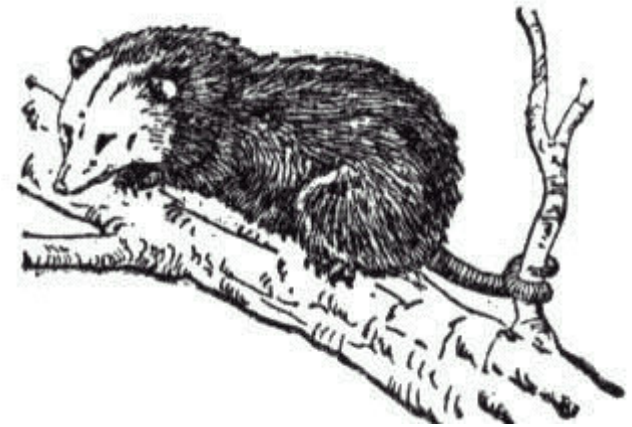


Opossums have more teeth (fifty!) than any other North American mammal.



As an animal originating from Mexico and South America, the opossum cannot tolerate severely cold weather. Veterans of hard winters often lose parts of ears and tails to frostbite.

## Wild by Nature: Opossums



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## The Discovery

On February 8, 1500, Spaniard explorer Vicente Yáñez Pinzó landed on the coast of Brazil in search of gold and other treasures. What he discovered was an animal many people do not treasure--the opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*). Until that moment, the existence of a pouch-bearing mammal, a marsupial, was unknown to western civilization. The mother opossum and her babies were brought back by the explorer and presented at the court of Spanish monarchs Ferdinand and Isabella, who marveled at this strange creature. While naturalists were fascinated by this "animal with two bellies," it would take zoological science a few hundred years to comprehend the opossum as more than just a strange beast.



## Natural History

The opossum is an extremely adaptable animal. Its existence was unknown in the Great Lakes region prior to 1800, but its range has slowly been expanding, mainly due to advantageous alterations humans have made to the landscape. Opossums are found in a wide variety of habitats, both rural and urban. The opossum is a true omnivore, eating a wide variety of plant and animal foods, including earthworms, insects, eggs, small mammals and birds, snakes, fruits, nuts, seeds, mushrooms and carrion. It generally forages at night, using its senses of smell and hearing to find food. Most opossums rarely live more than a year or two. Causes of mortality include winter weather, hawks, owls, dogs, foxes and, of course, automobiles.

## Defense Mechanisms

By nature, opossums are non-aggressive, non-destructive and do not pose a threat to humans. However, when threatened, they will attempt to defend themselves. They are best known for "playing 'possum" which is an involuntary, comatose-like state caused by extreme fear that may last from several minutes up to six hours. Other defense tactics include drooling and gaping the mouth in a threatening manner. While it can look frightening, the opossum is actually more scared of you than you are of it!

## Living with Opossums

If you see an opossum in your back yard, don't worry. Opossums are transient animals, staying in an area only 2-3 days before moving on. Trapping is neither necessary nor desirable. If an opossum continues to return to your area, try eliminating the things that attract it. Clear away bushes, woodpiles and other hiding places, pick up fallen fruit from trees and do not leave pet food out overnight. Secure garbage cans with tight-fitting lids. At night, keep doors and garages closed and shut windows located next to tree limbs and fences. If you find an opossum in your yard, just enjoy watching it and leave it alone.

