OPOSSUMS

Identification

An opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) is a whitish or grayish mammal about the size of a house cat (Fig. 1). Underfur is dense with sparse guard hairs. Its face is long and pointed, its ears rounded and hairless. Maximum length is 40 inches (102 cm); the ratlike tail is slightly less than half the total length. The tail may be unusually short in northern opossums due to loss by frostbite. Opossums may weigh as much as 14 pounds (6.3 kg); males average 6 to 7 pounds (2.7 to 3.2 kg) and females average 4 pounds (6.3 kg). The skull is usually 3 to 4 inches (8 to 10 cm) long and contains 50 teeth — more than are found in any other North
Opossums usually live alone, having a home range of 10 to 50 acres (4 to 20 ha). Young appear to roam randomly until they find a suitable home range. Usually they are active only at night. The mating season is January to July in warmer parts of the range but may start a month later and end a month earlier in northern areas. Opossums may raise 2, rarely 3, litters per year. The opossum is the only marsupial in North America. Like other marsupials, the blind, helpless young develop in a pouch. They are born 13 days after mating. The young, only 1/2 inch (1.3 cm) long, find their way into the female’s pouch where they each attach to one of 13 teats. An average of 7 young are born. They remain in the pouch for 7 to 8 weeks. The young remain with the mother another 6 to 7 weeks until weaned.

Most young die during their first year. Those surviving until spring will breed in that first year. The maximum age in the wild is about 7 years.

Although opossums have a top running speed of only 7 miles per hour (11.3 km/hr), they are well equipped to escape enemies. They readily enter burrows and climb trees. When threatened, an opossum may bare its teeth, growl, hiss, bite, screech, and exude a smelly, greenish fluid from its anal glands. If these defenses are not successful, an opossum may play dead.

When captured or surprised during daylight, opossums appear stupid and inhibited. They are surprisingly
intelligent, however. They rank above dogs in some learning and discrimination tests.

**Damage**

Although opossums may be considered desirable as game animals, certain individuals may be a nuisance near homes where they may get into garbage, bird feeders, or pet food. They may also destroy poultry, game birds, and their nests.

**Legal Status**

Laws protecting opossums vary from state to state. Usually there are open seasons for hunting or trapping opossums. It is advisable to contact local wildlife authorities before removing nuisance animals.

**Damage Prevention and Control Methods**

**Exclusion**

Prevent nuisance animals from entering structures by closing openings to cages and pens that house poultry. Opossums can be prevented from climbing over wire mesh fences by installing a tightly stretched electric fence wire near the top of the fence 3 inches (8 cm) out from the mesh. Fasten garbage can lids with a rubber strap.

**Traps**

Opossums are not wary of traps and may be easily caught with suitable-sized box or cage traps (Fig. 4). No. 1 or 1 1/2 leghold traps also are effective. Set traps along fences or trailways. Dirt hole sets or cubby sets are effective (Fig. 5). A dirt hole is about 3 inches (8 cm) in diameter and 8 inches (20 cm) deep. It extends into the earth at a 45° angle. The trap should be set at the entrance to the hole. A cubby is a small enclosure made of rocks, logs, or a box. The trap is set at the entrance to the cubby. The purpose of the dirt hole or cubby is to position the animal so
that it will place its foot on the trap. Place bait such as cheese, or slightly spoiled meat, fish, or fruit in the dirt hole or cubby to attract the animal. Using fruit instead of meat will reduce the chance of catching cats, dogs, or skunks.

A medium-sized body-gripping (kill type) trap will catch and kill opossums. Place bait behind the trap in such a way that the animal must pass through the trap to get it. Body-gripping traps kill the captured animal quickly. To reduce chances of catching pets, set the trap above ground on a running pole (Fig. 6).

**Shooting**

A rifle of almost any caliber or a shotgun loaded with No. 6 shot or larger will effectively kill opossums. Use a light to look for opossums after dark. If an opossum has not been alarmed, it will usually pause in the light long enough to allow an easy shot. Once alarmed, opossums do not run rapidly. They will usually climb a nearby tree where they can be located with a light. Chase running opossums on foot or with a dog. If you lose track, run to the last place where you saw the animal. Stop and listen for the sound of claws on bark to locate the tree the animal is climbing.

Sometimes opossums can be approached quietly and killed by a strong blow with a club, but they can be surprisingly hard to kill in this manner. They can be taken alive by firmly grasping the end of the tail. If the animal begins to “climb its tail” to reach your hand, lower the animal until it touches the ground. This will distract the opossum and cause it to try to escape by crawling. Opossums can carry rabies, so wear heavy gloves and be wary of bites.

Euthanize unwanted animals humanely with carbon dioxide gas, or release them several miles from the point of capture.
Economics of Damage and Control

No data are available; however, it is usually worthwhile to remove a particular animal that is causing damage.

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Figures 1, 2a, 2c, and 3 from Schwartz and Schwartz (1981).

Figure 2b by Jill Sack Johnson.

Figures 4, 5, and 6 by Michael D. Stickney, from the New York Department of Environmental Conservation publication “Trapping Furbearers, Student Manual” (1980), by R. Howard, L. Berchielli, C. Parsons, and M. Brown. The figures are copyrighted and are used with permission.

For Additional Information


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