



# Virginia Opossum

*Didelphis virginiana*



*The Virginia opossum (Didelphis virginiana) is the only marsupial, or pouched mammal, native to North America. Although the opossum is not endemic to Vermont, a stable population has been established here. The opossum is a very good climber and capable swimmer, enabling it to avoid many potential predators. Another escape strategy it employs is faking its death (also called "playing possum"). The opossum can adapt to a wide variety of habitats, which has led to its widespread distribution throughout the United States.*

## Vermont Wildlife Fact Sheet

### Physical Description

The Virginia opossum is similar in size to a large house cat, weighing between nine to 13 pounds and having a body length of 24 to 40 inches. The male is generally larger than the female. The fur of the Virginia opossum is grayish white in color and covers the whole body, except for its ears and tail. The opossum has a long, scaly prehensile tail, which is adapted for grasping and hanging. Its elongated head is adorned with short black ears, a long pointed snout, and long whiskers. Each foot has five toes with the first toe on the hind feet being clawless and opposable, or thumb like. Perhaps its most well known characteristic is that of the female's fur lined pouch, which is used for carrying the developing young.

### Life Cycle

The Virginia opossum breeds in late January to early July, after which the female constructs a nest in the hollow of a tree or an abandoned burrow. The young are born about 12 to

13 days after fertilization, from February through July. The female will raise one or two litters each year, with the first one generally in February and the second in June. The litter size may range from five to thirteen young, the average size being eight.

The young opossums are incredibly small at birth, about the size of a honeybee, each weighing only 1/5 of a gram. They are blind and nearly helpless and, immediately after birth, must crawl into the vertical opening of the female's pouch. There, they begin to nurse. Soon after the young opossum begins to nurse, the nipple begins to quickly swell, filling its entire mouth. This unusual occurrence causes the young to become attached to the nipple and unable to remove itself. For a period of 55- 60 days the young nurse in this way, until they are finally large enough to detach themselves. The young will then leave the pouch and, at this time, may be carried on the mother's back.

By the time the young are 90 to 105 days old, they are

independent of their mother. They reach sexual maturity at six to seven months of age. Typically, the females will mate and raise a litter the first breeding season following birth.

### Food Items

Opossums are insectivores and omnivores. This means they eat a varied diet of insects, worms, frogs, birds, fruits, nuts and carrion (dead animals). They will also prey on small rodents, voles, shrews and moles. Opossums are often seen feeding at compost piles, garbage cans and bird feeders.

### Habits & Habitat

Opossums inhabit a wide variety of habitats. They naturally prefer deciduous wooded areas near water sources, but can also be found in farmlands or marshes. They have become very common in urban, suburban and farming areas. Opossums are wanderers, being nomadic and not staying in one specific territory. They reside in a variety of homes including abandoned

burrows, tree cavities, hollow logs, attics, garages or building foundations. They are not adept at digging, so they often utilize burrows that another animal may have excavated.

Opossums are nocturnal, being most active at night, and are very aggressive animals. When approached by a potential predator, they will often hiss, screech, and bear all their teeth to ward away attack. They will also feign death, or "play possum" by closing its eyes and rolling over. Because they have poor social development, most opossums are solitary animals. The females will occasionally live in groups but the males fight when ever together.

## **Abundance**

Opossums have adapted well to changes humans have made in the environment. They seem to continue to expand their geographic range, as Vermont exemplifies.

## **History**

When the European settlers colonized America, there were no opossums living in Vermont. Their range did not extend any further north than Pennsylvania at this time. However, their nomadic nature brought them further north, possibly due to the increase in farmlands and food availability.

## **Resource Utilization**

The Virginia opossum is hunted both for food as well as for its pelt in many parts of its

range. In some locations, the meat from an opossum is considered a delicacy. Its pelt, however, is of little value due to its overabundance on the fur market.

## **Management Efforts**

Current Virginia opossum populations within the state of Vermont are stable. There is no active plan designed for this species, but continued monitoring is conducted to ensure that their population remains healthy and abundant in Vermont.

*Illustration by Georg Mützel*