



STATE OF CONNECTICUT  
DEPARTMENT OF ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION  
WILDLIFE BUREAU

INFORMATIONAL SERIES

OPOSSUM

General

The opossum (Didelphis virginianus) is the only member of the order Marsupialia (pouched animals) found in Connecticut. Opossums are non-hibernators, but will usually "hole up" during cold, adverse weather. In Connecticut opossums suffer from frostbite and may be missing the tips of their ears and tails.

The opossum is a medium-sized (15" to 20" without its tail), primitive animal with long, coarse, grayish-white fur. Black, brown, and albino opossums have been found, but are very uncommon. They have a sharp-pointed and slender muzzle, prominent, thin ears, and short legs. A long (9" to 20"), scaly, scantily-haired, prehensile tail enables it to hang from trees for short periods or transport leaves to potential nest sites. Opossums have 5 toes on each foot. The first toe on each hind foot is a divergent, clawless, thumblike, grasping toe. Both sexes are similar, although males are commonly larger in size.



Opossums possess orange eyeshine. When frightened, opossums bare their teeth, hiss or growl, and frequently drool saliva. Being non-aggressive, opossums readily retreat to trees, brush piles, or other available cover when pursued by man or predators. A common defense mechanism is feigning death or "playing possum" when cornered. Opossums are also strong swimmers and take to shallow water when necessary.

### Habits

As a marsupial, the opossum has the most primitive reproductive strategy of any animal in North America.

In Connecticut, breeding usually begins in early March. Opossums produce 1 to 2 litters each year. The average litter size is 9 with the young being born blind and extremely altricial (helpless). The young weigh 0.0046 ounce and are so tiny that 9 individuals would fill up half a teaspoon. The blind embryos crawl at least 3 inches to their mother's pouch, attach themselves to a teat and remain "locked" on to it for approximately 60 days. After 80 days, young opossums are weaned, leave the pouch, and typically can be seen riding around on their mother's back. By 100 days of age they usually are independent. Opossums reach sexual maturity and may breed during their first year of life.

Opossums inhabit woodland areas along streams, ponds, lakes, swamps, or marshes. Farmland and woodlots are preferred over extensively forested areas.

Shelter is found in abandoned den sites of other animals or cavities in den trees, trash heaps, rock piles, or brush piles; buildings may also be used.

The opossum is both a scavenger and an omnivore, feeding primarily at night. Its diet consists mainly of insects, carrion, reptiles, amphibians, birds and their eggs, crustaceans, worms, grubs, berries, fruits, cereal grains, and small mammals.

### Benefits

Opossums are more beneficial to humans than harmful, feeding on many types of insects, mice, and voles. Also, the opossum is an important furbearer in Connecticut. In recent years, the opossum harvest in the U.S. has exceeded 1 million pelts valued at more than 2.5 million dollars annually.

### Management of Nuisances

Due to their musky odor, opossums seem to be avoided by predators. Occasionally an opossum will fall prey to a dog, fox, bobcat, large hawk, or owl.

Opossums will sometimes cause problems such as raiding poultry yards, eating limited amounts of corn (in the milk stage), or simply getting into gardens where they will feed on vegetables, apples, grapes, and strawberries.

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Two of the best control measures used against unwanted opossums are:

- 1) **Prevention:** By properly maintaining poultry yards and houses, opossums will be kept out. Gardens should be electric-fenced against opossums and other hungry animals.
- 2) **Trapping:** Animals can be easily live-trapped. Set a trap (size 9" x 9" x 32") where the animal frequents and bait it with fish, apples, or canned cat or dog food. If there is a chance of catching a skunk, cover the trap with burlap so the animal can be handled safely. Trapped animals should be transported to suitable habitat, at least 5 miles away.

During the regulated trapping season, problem opossums may be harvested by local trappers. Trapping is a valuable tool used to control numbers and prevent more nuisance and disease problems.

#### References and Further Reading

- Caslick, J. W. and D. J. Decker 1981. Control of wildlife damage in the home and garden. Cornell Univ. Coop. Ext. Booklet.
- Keefe, F. 1967. The world of the opossum. Lippincott, Philadelphia.



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