

# OPOSSUMS

**They help to maintain a clean and healthy environment;  
Nature's gently and quiet little Sanitation Engineers!**



**Opossums** are marsupials living in North America.  
**Possums** are marsupials living in Australia.

**In the ecosystem, if you trap or relocate opossums, they  
WILL be replaced by less desirable animals, such as RACCOONS!**

## Facts:

- Opossums are native to North America. The most common is the Virginia Opossum. The only marsupial (pouched mammal) found in the United States and Canada.
- Often, fear or dislike is based on misinformation. We hope that more people can learn to live in harmony with these often misunderstood animals.
- Opossum **DO NOT DIG INTO SOIL, DOES NOT DIG UP YOUR FLOWER BULBS, NO CHEWING TELEPHONE OR ELECTRICAL WIRES, NOR DO THEY DESTROY PROPERTY**. Opossums are NOT the most destructive creatures, they have a potential to make a mess.
- Opossums have a naturally low body temperature and makes them less susceptible to other diseases that can affect wildlife animals (such as distemper). The chance of rabies in an opossum is EXTREMELY RARE.

## Make Peace with the Opossums

- Examples of common feeling; ugly, mean, pesky. A face only a mother could love!

## Predators

- Opossums have a relatively short life span; living an average of three years.
- Man is one of the biggest predators!
- Many are killed by cars, dogs, owls, and larger wildlife.

## Great Groundkeeper

- If you are lucky to have one of these guys come around, without cost, he is quietly cleaning up what he can and will move to help someone else. He takes his pay only what he eats, and maybe a dry place to sleep before moving on.

## Shelter

- If you have an opossum around today, just be patient; he or she will move on shortly! **The opossum is just merely passing through.** They are not "den" animals; they never stay long in one place. They are rarely used more than a couple of nights in a row by the same animal. A female with young may stay for longer periods.

## Behavior

- Adults cannot hang from their tails. They do have prehensile tails which they use to help grip and balance when climbing trees.
- Opossums CANNOT JUMP or RUN; they walk very fast.
- If one Opossum sees another, it will walk the other way, so as not to compete for available food sources.

## Natural Environment

- Opossums are nocturnal; they are awake at night and sleep during the day. They spend nights searching for food.
- They do not hibernate; opossums do slow down during the winter. They live in burrows that they fill with dry leaves or even shredded paper, and fat reserves help keep them warm. In the summer, they will lick themselves and cover their fur in spit to keep cool.

## Survival Rate is Low

- Opossums of all ages are subject to predation by dogs, cats, coyotes, bobcats, hawks, and owls. The younger they are, the more vulnerable they are. We have all seen an opossum killed along roadside. Although the adult may be injured or even killed by a car, if it has babies, many of the babies may be saved by getting them quickly to a rehabilitator. In any setting, they very rarely live to see their third year.
- Opossums cannot bulk up with fat like raccoons, so they are in danger of freezing when temperatures are below 19 degrees Fahrenheit.

## Rehabilitator in your area

- Contact a wildlife rehabilitator for advice on how to proceed on Sick, Injured, or Orphaned Wildlife.
- <http://web.extension.illinois.edu/wildlife/injured.cfm>
- Cook County Contact List, see below, Internet Resources.

## Diet / Natural Pest Control

- Opossums are scavengers. They move from place to place in search of good food sources and a comfy place to sleep.
- They are omnivores; eat both vegetation and meat. In the wild, they eat grass, nuts, fruit, mice, chickens, wild birds, insects (including roaches), worms, snails, slugs, crickets, beetles, ticks, and snakes (including venomous ones). In the city, they will eat garbage and roadkill, catches and eats rats, all of which is helpful to keep diseases at bay. **They are beneficial for helping to control the overpopulation of snakes, rodents, and insects.**
- Opossums act like little vacuum cleaners when it comes to ticks, including those that spread Lyme disease.

## Lyme Disease

- By fracturing habitats and disrupting ecosystems, humans have allowed the ticks that feed on wild mice to flourish and these intrusions are coming back to bite us. But in places where predators are scarce, the ticks run wild.
- A single opossum might kill an astonishing 4,000 ticks in a week.

## Problem and Solutions

- **Feeding animals is NOT an act of kindness.** DO NOT feed any wildlife. This will lead to undesirable situations. Feeding wildlife causes animals to lose their fear for humans and other animals.
- Secure under decks and chimneys.
- Trim tree limbs to prevent roof access.
- If the Opossum moves into your attic space, he can be easily convinced to move along.

## Natural Defenses

- When threatened, opossums run, growl, belch, urinate, and defecate. When they “play possum”, and act as if they are dead, actually, the opossum has an involuntary comatose-like state induced by extreme fear (so basically, they faint). The body is limp or stiff, they roll over, close their eyes (or stare off into space), its front feet form into balls, bare their teeth, and drool runs out of its mouth or foams and a foul-smelling fluid is secreted from glands. This state can last from several minutes to several hours. Once the danger has passed, and the opossum “comes to” again and goes on his way. An effective deterrent to predators looking for a hot meal.

## Sounds

- Opossums are almost silent.
- When cornered or attacked, they will growl and hiss. They will bare their teeth and snap, almost all of which is a bluff.

## **Pets**

- In general, opossums are docile, **NON-AGGRESSIVE** animals and **WILL NOT ATTACK YOUR PETS**.
- It is more likely that a dog will injure or kill an opossum. A cat may attack and kill young opossum (same size as a rat). Adult opossums and cats seem to have a mutual respect and leave each other alone.

## **Do Not**

- Do not use harmful chemicals/poisons to kill opossums as they might be banned in your country or could negatively affect other more desirable wildlife.
- Check the local laws before using the remedies to trap and kill the opossums.
- The Illinois law does not allow trapping and relocating of opossums to any public place (i.e. forest preserves, parks, etc.).
- Trapping and relocating animals several miles away may seem like an acceptable resolution to a wildlife conflict, but it actually creates more problems. Relocated animals are released in an unfamiliar environment with unknown predators, unknown food and water sources, and unknown shelter. Studies give less than a 50% chance of survival to relocated animals.
- **In addition, the space in the ecosystem vacated by the trapped and relocated animals will quickly be filled by another opossum or maybe an even less-desirable animal, like raccoons!!!**

## Internet Resources:

### Cook County Rehabilitator List (2017) for Sick, Injured, Orphaned Wildlife:

<http://web.extension.illinois.edu/wildlife/injured.cfm>

Cook	Debra	Pocius	Midlothian	708/262-9805
Cook	Tracy	Caccavella	Oak Lawn	708/537-4258
Cook	Donna	Sendra	Chicago Ridge	708/636-8586
Cook	Lila	Lahalih	Elgin	847/216-3296
Cook	Vicky	Johnson	Crestwood	708/489-0872
Cook	Douglas	Golubski	Elgin	847/980-7145
Cook	Mary	Grabowski	Streamwood	630/540-2490
Cook	Jane	Morocco	River Forest	708/822-7772
Cook	Jennifer	Kuhn	Streamwood	630/540-2490
Cook	Laura	Villarreal	Oak Forest	708/925-7650
Cook	Diane	Spyrka	Chicago	773/667-0088
Cook	Caryn	Schrenzel	Chicago	773/286-3952
Cook	Lisa	Szydelko	Tinley Park	708/256-3483
Cook	Dianne	Cobban	Homewood	708/926-4203
Cook	Megan	Ross	Chicago Lincoln Park Zoo	312/742-7721
Cook	David	Uhter	Chicago Heights	708/758-2761
Cook	Marianne	Kasper	Berwyn	708/420-6501
Cook	Karl	Kabat	Elk Grove Village	847/812-7955
Cook	James	Notter	Oak Forest	708/212-4992

### Living with Wildlife in Illinois

[http://web.extension.illinois.edu/wildlife/directory\\_show.cfm?species=opossum](http://web.extension.illinois.edu/wildlife/directory_show.cfm?species=opossum)

### Friends of Texas Wildlife

#### Opossums; Why We Love Them!

<http://www.ftwl.org/node/151>

### National Geographic

<http://www.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/group/opossums/>

### Facts about the Common Opossum

<https://www.livescience.com/56182-opossum-facts.html>

### The National Opossum Society

<http://www.opossum.org/>

### 10 Things you didn't know about Opossums

<https://www.mnn.com/earth-matters/animals/stories/10-things-you-didnt-know-about-opossums>

### Making Peace with an 'Possum

<http://www.dfwwildlife.org/opossum.html>

### National Wildlife Federation

#### Give Opossums a Break

<https://www.nwf.org/News-and-Magazines/National-Wildlife/Animals/Archives/2015/Opossums.aspx>

### Wildlife Rescue and Rehabilitation

#### Lyme Disease & Opossums

<http://www.wildliferescuerehab.com/blog/lyme-disease>