

Opossums: Hotline Conversation Prompts Article

by Carol Ann Harlos

Recently I had a conversation on HotLine about opossums. I want to share the information I gave.

Opossums are marsupials meaning that they are born relatively underdeveloped (the size of a jelly bean) and then move to a pouch on the mother's abdomen where they complete development. The Virginia opossum is the only species in the United States and Canada. They are also mammals as they nurse their young. Females can have about three litters each year.

Opossums are about the size of a cat. They can live in woods, farmlands, cities, and on your property. They take shelter in rock piles, abandoned burrows, under porches (which is why the person called), and in garages.

We had an opossum climb a trellis! They are great climbers because their back feet have no claws, just toes. They also have prehensile tails which means they can wrap around trees. Opossums take naps in the winter, wake up to eat, and then go back to sleep. Thus they are not hibernators.

I think opossum are adorable especially the babies. Many people are put off by their appearance. But they are helpful in the fight against Lyme disease! Ticks are not easily found on opossum. Why? They groom them off by eating them! I read that one opossum can eat 5000 ticks in one season! Opossum also eat slugs, beetles, and snails - so gardeners

should like them. They also eat voles, mice, rats, and cockroaches. They are immune to the venom of poisonous snakes which they kill and eat, They clean up roadkill.

Opossum just want to be left alone. People are afraid they carry rabies but they tend to be resistant to this virus.

Opossum have enemies. These include fox, dogs, coyotes, owls and humans. They can run, hiss, bar their 50 sharp teeth, or "play possum" when threatened. They can also secrete a foul substance when threatened.

If opossum are still not welcomed on your property you can do the following:

- Don't leave people food or pet food outside at night.
- Clean your grills after use.
- Remove hiding places.
- Put sheet metal on places where they can climb.



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