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Why Should You Love Opossums?

Article by Kate Lynch, previously printed in the *Marin Independent Journal*

The Virginia Opossum is a passive animal who is grossly misunderstood. Seeing an opossum in trash after the bin was knocked over by a raccoon, or dead on the road after a car strike, are the only times your average person gets the opportunity to observe these animals. In reality, opossums are shy, gentle animals that offer many benefits for humans.

If you are an organic gardener, you should love opossums! Yes, you will have to share ripe fruit with them. They have a major sweet tooth! But they will also clean the ground below your fruit tree of dropped, overripe, and sometimes downright fermented fruit. More importantly, they love to snack on all kinds of garden pests including rats and mice, slugs and snails, crane flies and moths. Opossums are a gardener's best friend! They are also useful scavengers and will eat a variety of dead animals they find in their travels.

Opossums often get blamed for nuisance behavior of other wildlife. An opossum is unlikely to knock over a garbage can, but he'll take advantage of spilled garbage after the raccoons are done. Opossums don't dig, but they will take advantage of worms and grubs unearthed by a digging skunk.

Your domestic dog or cat is a far bigger threat to an opossum than the opossum is to them. The second most common reason (after car strikes) that opossums come to WildCare's Wildlife Hospital is that mama opossum was grabbed and shaken by a domestic dog. Mother opossums carry their babies in a pouch on their stomach called a marsupium. Often, when mom is killed by a car or a dog, her pups are still safe inside her pouch. If you see an opossum dead on the side of the road, and it's safe to do so, check the pouch for living pups. If babies are present, bring them, still in the mother's pouch, to WildCare, or your local wildlife care center, right away. You can also call our "Living with Wildlife Hotline" at 415-456-7283 for advice.

Opossums eat ticks, and they can consume about 5,000 ticks per season. They truly are champions in the fight against Lyme disease! Opossums are essentially immune to the rabies virus. Their average body temperature is about 94-96° F, too low for the rabies virus to take hold. They don't get distemper (that's a canine disease). They are essentially immune to pit viper (i.e. rattlesnake) venom.



Opossums are great climbers. They have a prehensile tail which they use as a safety line but they don't hang by their tails to sleep—Disney made that up. They do use their dexterous tails to carry dried leaf litter and grasses back to their den for bedding. To help them climb, these amazing animals also have opposable thumbs on both their front and back feet.

Opossums are very good mothers. The mother opossum will carry her 13 babies in her marsupium, or pouch, for over three months until they are old enough to emerge and ride on her back. Once they get too large, they will fall off her back, usually one or two at a time. At that point, the young opossum is on his own, ready to get to work eating the ticks, slugs, snails and other unwanted garden pests in your yard.

WildCare encourages you to appreciate these amazing animals (North America's only native marsupial), and to keep an eye out for injured and orphaned opossums this spring!