

# School-to-Nature



## Opossum

You are unlikely to see an Opossum on a Conservancy trail, because they are NOCTURNAL. They move around and hunt mostly at night, but may be seen sometimes at twilight when the days are longer in summer. They are omnivorous, eating buds, fruit, small amphibians, fish and insects.



Opossums are the only marsupials that live in North America. This means they have a pouch to raise their young, like a kangaroo. Babies develop in their mother's womb for 13 days, and then these tiny creatures the size of a honeybee crawl out of their mother's womb and into her pouch, where they spend the next 2-3 months before they are ready to live outside of the pouch. Then the babies crawl onto their mother's back and she will carry them that way as she looks for food. About 3 months later they can live fully on their own.

Opossums are incredibly agile. They are world-class tree climbers with sharp claws and opposable thumbs on their hands and feet that allow them to grip a branch; and their clever tails can also wrap around branches for safety. This allows them to evade some predators such as dogs, coyotes, and larger hunting birds such as owls and hawks.



Opossums have a reputation for wandering onto people's porches and decks in search of bird-feeding seed, for digging into trash bags, and then also for being creepy-looking because of their bare tails and their slow movement; but opossums are greatly misunderstood, and are very useful animals. Opossums kill and eat ticks by the thousands, especially the deer ticks that spread Lyme disease. It is estimated that an opossum will eat over 5,000 ticks in a single season. This is of great benefit to all of us. They are also largely immune to rabies and to snake bites.

When an opossum is attacked or afraid, it will "play possum," meaning it will freeze in place or even curl up in a ball for up to 4 hours, until it feels safe again to move. This is not a voluntary reaction; it is a little like fainting. They may also bare their teeth and foam at the mouth to scare away predators. Opossums are NOT a threat to humans in any way, and they should be respected and appreciated.

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