

## Virginia Opossum

*Didelphis virginiana*

The Virginia opossum is a unique animal native to North Carolina. In 1612, the English explorer, John Smith, described it as having the head of a pig, a tail of a rat, and the size of a cat with baggage under her belly where she carries and suckles her young. The opossum is the only native North Carolina marsupial and has other traits and adaptations not found in other animals.

### History and Status

The Virginia opossum has been present in North Carolina since the Pleistocene period, and it probably evolved from *Didelphis marsupialis*, which is still present in Mexico and Central America. Populations of this common mammal have remained stable or increased for many years. The opossum is classified as a game and fur-bearing animal and is hunted and trapped for fur, food and sport. More opossums are killed on our roadways by vehicles than die from hunting or trapping. Still, the outlook for opossum populations is good since they have adapted rather well to human development and do well in urban environments.

### Description

The Virginia opossum is the only marsupial (mammal with a pouch) native to North America. It is an omnivore, eating anything that is readily available and digestible. It is a small mammal about the size of a house cat with a long, pointed nose, black

hairless ears, dark eyes and a nearly hairless tail adapted to grasping objects (called "prehensile"). The opossum is adept at climbing, running and swimming at a relatively slow and deliberate pace. Each foot has five digits with all but the first digit on the hind foot having claws. The first digit of the hind foot is opposable and functions like the human thumb, enabling the opossum to grasp objects while climbing. Pelage, or fur, coloration ranges from light gray to nearly black with most individuals exhibiting light underfur with black guard hairs. The Virginia opossum has a total of 50 teeth, more than any other North American mammal.

### Habitat and Habits

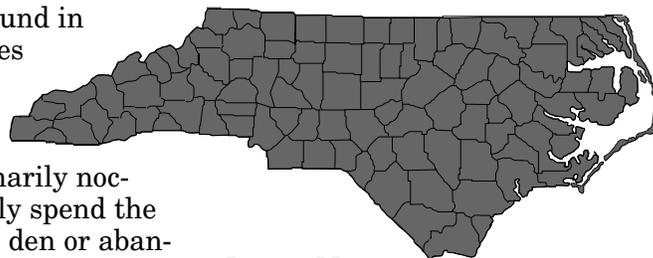
Opossums inhabit all habitats within their range from sea level to elevations over 10,000 feet. Although they prefer deciduous woodlands in association with streams, all habitats within their range of ecological tolerances are used. They are well-adapted to both arboreal and terrestrial habitats and are found in the highest densities where concentrated food sources occur.

Opossums are primarily nocturnal and generally spend the daylight hours in a den or abandoned squirrel nest. Although opossums do not hibernate, they

may remain in a den during short periods of extremely cold weather in winter.

Opossums breed up to twice yearly from January to October and produce two litters ranging in size from four to seven young that are born after a short gestation period of 12 days. The embryonic young pull themselves with their forelimbs to the marsupium, or pouch, where they must attach themselves to a nipple by their mouth or die. The young remain attached to a nipple for at least 48 days and continue to develop. At about 55 days, when the young are about the size of a house mouse, they can open their mouths and may crawl out of the pouch for short periods. Until they are about 85 days old, the young either travel with the mother in the pouch or on her back. When the young are approximately 100 days old they are weaned and will leave the mother and litter mates and disperse on their own.

Most people are familiar with



**Range Map:**  
Found statewide ■

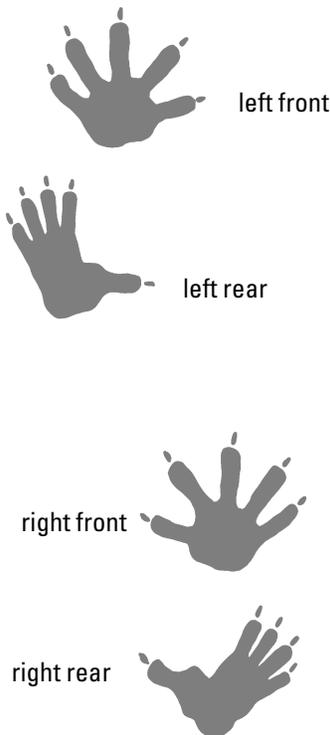
the phrase “playing possum” derived from the opossum’s habit of feigning death when approached by a potential predator. An opossum will first face the predator with its mouth open and will hiss or growl. If it grabs and shakes the opossum, it will feign death while defecating and emitting a foul-smelling greenish substance from its anal glands. This behavior frequently causes the predator to release the opossum and leave it alone. Opossums are immune to the venom of our more common poisonous snakes and they can feed on copperheads, rattlesnakes and cottonmouth moccasins without risk of injury or death due to venom.

### Range and Distribution

The Virginia opossum is the only native marsupial present in North America north of Mexico, and it occurs from southern Ontario and British Columbia, Canada, through much of the United States and Mexico to northwestern Costa Rica. It is present throughout North Carolina. Virginia opossums have extended their range northward in recent history and continue to do so through natural migration and introductions by man. All of the populations west of the Rocky Mountains are the result of introductions by man.

### People Interactions

The Virginia opossum is classified as both a game and fur-bearing animal in North Carolina, and the harvest of these animals for food, fur and sport has had no significant impact on their populations. Opossums will occasionally be found in chicken houses where they will eat eggs or young chicks, and they will raid garbage cans on a nightly basis if food is available. Occasionally someone will become frightened by seeing one scurry into the shadows at night and think they have seen a very large rat. The most frequent



interaction that people have with opossums in North Carolina is when someone runs over one in the highway.

### References

Ashkar, Carolyn Sellers. “Possum Times,” *Wildlife in North Carolina* (Aug. 1986, p. 20).  
 Chapman, J.A. and G. A. Feldhamer, eds. *Wild Mammals of North America: Biology, Management, and Economics* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1982).  
 Elliot, Doug. “The Ultimate Survivor,” *Wildlife in North Carolina* (Nov. 1980, p. 24).  
 Novak, M., J.A. Baker, M.E. Obbard and B. Malloch, eds. *Wild Furbearer Management and Conservation In North America*. (Ontario, Canada: Ontario Trappers Association, 1987).

### Credits

Written by Perry W. Sumner.  
 Illustrated by J. T. Newman.  
 Produced January 1995 by the Division of Conservation Education, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission.  
 The Wildlife Resources Commission is an Equal Opportunity Employer and all wildlife programs are administered for the benefit of all North Carolina citizens without prejudice toward age, sex, race, religion or national origin. Violations of this pledge may be reported to the Equal Employment Officer, N.C. Wildlife Resources Commission, 512 N. Salisbury St., Raleigh, N.C. 27604-1188. (919) 733-2241.

## WILD Facts

### VIRGINIA OPOSSUM

#### Classification

Class: Mammalia  
 Order: Marsupialia

#### Average Size

Length: 21 to 36 in.  
 Height: 6 to 10 in.  
 Weight: 4 to 15 lbs.

#### Food

Insects, worms, fruit, leaves, small mammals, young birds, acorns, snails, snakes, lizards, bird eggs, young rabbits, carrion, maggots, spiders, frogs, toads, crayfish and garbage.

#### Breeding

Opossums are sexually mature from 6 months to 1 year old. Males mate with several females from January to October, females breed twice per year. Males remain solitary except when mating.

#### Young

The gestation period is 12 to 13 days. Embryonic young crawl to the marsupium, or pouch, and attach to a nipple for 48 days. One to 15 young may be born, although typically only 4 to 7 successfully reach the marsupium, attach to a nipple and survive. When born, young opossums weigh 0.13 grams and increase a thousand times in 100 days to 130 grams.

#### Life Expectancy

Average 1 to 2 years, few live longer than 4 years in the wild.