

*BIOLOGY, LEGAL STATUS, CONTROL MATERIALS, AND  
DIRECTIONS FOR USE*

## **Opossums**

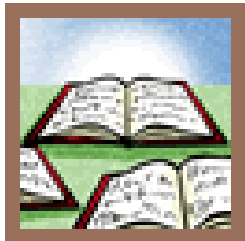
*(Didelphis virginiana)*



**Introduction:** The opossum is the only native North American marsupial (animals that carry their young in an abdominal pouch). It is not, however, native to California; it was introduced many years ago and has now become well established throughout much of the state.



**Identification:** Opossums are about the size of a house cat and have coarse grayish fur, a pointed face, and hairless rounded ears. They are about 2 to 3 feet long, including the hairless tail, and weigh up to 15 pounds. Males are usually larger than females. Their feet resemble small hands with widely spread fingers. Opossums are well adapted for climbing. Their long, hairless, prehensile tail and opposable toe on the hind foot assist in holding onto small branches or similar structures. Opossums can also carry nesting materials and other items with their tails.



**Legal Status:** The California Fish and Game Code classify opossums as nongame mammals. If you find opossums threatening growing crops or other property of which you are the owner or tenant, you may control them using any legal means. Department of Fish and Game (DFG) regulations prohibit the relocation of wildlife without written permission from the DFG. Always check to make sure that there are no local restrictions pertaining to the removal of opossums prior to taking any action.



**Damage:** In its nocturnal foraging the opossum is a true omnivore, feeding on fruits, nuts, green plants, insects, snakes, frogs, birds and their eggs, and small mammals such as meadow voles. It eats fresh meat and carrion and may often be seen feeding on road kills. Opossums that live near people may visit vegetable gardens, compost piles, garbage cans, or food dishes intended for dogs or cats. Having lost much of their natural fear of people they will enter a home through a pet door in a search for food. Fortunately, they are not aggressive unless cornered.

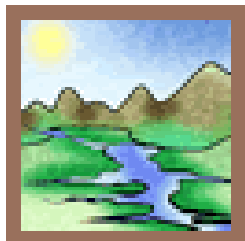
Opossums are considered a nuisance in gardens and near homes where they feed on berries, grapes, and tree fruits and nuts, and defecate on garden paths and patios. They will fight with cats and dogs and can inflict serious injury with their sharp, pointed teeth.

Opossums carry diseases such as leptospirosis, tuberculosis, relapsing fever, tularemia, spotted fever, toxoplasmosis, coccidiosis, trichomoniasis, and Chagas' disease. They may also be infested with fleas, ticks, mites, and lice. Opossums are hosts for cat and dog fleas especially in urban environments.



**Range:** Range Map.

[Virginia Opossum](#)



**Habitat:** The preferred habitats are diverse, ranging from arid to moist and wooded to open fields. They prefer environments near streams and wetlands. Opossum may take shelter in abandoned burrows of other animals, tree cavities, brush piles, and beneath dense cover. In urban and suburban settings they may den under steps, porches, decks, garden sheds, and if accessible, in attics, garages, and beneath houses, where they make untidy nests. The old belief that opossums are nomadic without well developed home ranges has been disproved. They have

complex but flexible social relationships with overlapping home ranges that allow high populations to develop where food is plentiful.



**Biology:** The opossums mating season extends from January to July; two litters are produced averaging about 7 young each. After a short 13 day gestation period, the ½ inch long young are born. Like other marsupials, the blind helpless young find their way into the mother's pouch, where each attaches to one of the 13 teats. They remain for about 8 weeks, during which they continue development and growth. At approximately 11 weeks of age they can leave the pouch for short periods. When the young become too large for all to fit inside the pouch, some will ride along by hanging onto the mothers back. The young are weaned at about 14 weeks. Females mate again after the first litter of the season becomes independent. The second litter will be sufficiently grown to leave the

mother by fall. Mortality in the young is high; most perish before they are a year old. Young that survive until the next spring will breed. Few opossums live beyond 3 years.



**Damage Prevention and Control Methods:** Opossums generally do not become too numerous. However, they are highly adaptable and are great survivors. Once they have invaded a neighborhood they will probably remain as long as food, water, and shelter are available.

**Exclusion:** Most problems with opossums occur when they nest beneath stairs, porches, decks or buildings.

Screening or blocking them out is effective. Before doing so make sure the animal has left before undertaking any blocking activities. An easy way to determine if the animals have left is to sprinkle a smooth layer of flour about 1/8 inches thick in front of the entrance. Examine this patch soon after dark; the presence of footprints indicates the animal has left and the opening can be closed off. Close off all potential openings with 1/4 inch mesh hardware cloth. This small mesh also excludes rats and mice. Note, opossums usually live alone unless they are with young.

Opossums can also be excluded from gardens by means of a poultry wire fence. The fence should be 4 feet high with the top 12 to 18 inches of the fence bent outward, away from the garden and not attached to any support. Since the top of the fence is not rigid the fence bends under the animal's weight, preventing climbing. As an alternative any standard wire fence can be made opossum proof by stretching electric charged wire in front of the top of the fence, 3 inches out from the mesh. Use a cattle-type electric fence charger to activate the wire, and follow installation instructions carefully.



**Habitat Modification:** The aim of habitat control is to make your premises less appealing to the opossum. Cut back overgrown shrubbery and trim trees that overhang rooftops at least 5 feet from the roof edge. Pick up and dispose of fallen fruit. Stack firewood or similar tightly to avoid leaving attractive gaps suitable for a den. Alternatively, store lumber 18 inches off of the ground. Garbage cans should have tight lids. Remove food left for pets outdoors by nightfall.

**Frightening:** Not Recommended. However, a motion activated sprinkler device sometimes induces a short term fright response in opossums. If the animal has established the habit of visiting the yard or garden, this frightening method rarely lasts for more than a few days.

**Fumigants:** Not recommended.

**Repellents:**

An array of chemical repellent products is marketed for repelling various wildlife including opossums. Unfortunately, none offer significant results. The odor of mothballs or naphthalene crystals, used as a home remedy repellent, has occasionally been reported to be successful in driving opossums from confined

areas although this is not recommended.

**Toxic Bait:** No toxicants are registered for opossum control. Poison baits sold for rodents should NOT be used to control opossums. The legal penalty for such pesticide misuse can be substantial, and the practice usually comes to light through the accidental poisoning of someone's pet.

**Trapping:** Opossums are not wary of traps and can easily be caught with a box or cage type live catch trap. Traps should be at least 10 by 12 by 32 inches in size. Set traps along trails or known routes of travel. Fish flavored canned cat food works well as trap bait, but it often attracts cats as well. To avoid this possibility try using raw chicken eggs, jam or peanut butter spread on bread. Other baits can include overripe fruit such as grapes, bananas, or melon.

Live trapping presents the problem of dealing with the animal once captured. It is illegal to relocate an opossum without a permit. Remember, when trapping always check the trap daily. Live captured opossums should be euthanized by CO<sub>2</sub> gas. Trapping opossums requires a trapping license issued by the Department of Fish and Game. Local restrictions may also apply to removal of opossums.

**Other Considerations:**

**Shooting:** In rural areas where legal and safe to do so; always check with your local Fish and Game Warden to ensure compliance with local laws and ordinances. Because of their nocturnal habits, shooting is not very effective.

## REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READING

Clark, Kevin D. 1994.. Managing Raccoons, Skunks and Opossums in Urban Settings. Proc 16th Vertebr. Pest Conf. (W.S. Halverson & A.C. Crabb Eds.) Published at Univ of Calif., Davis.

Marsh, Rex E., Whisson D. A., Salmon T.P. 2005. Wildlife Pest Control around Gardens and Homes, 2nd Ed., Univ of Calif. Pub 21385.

