

LaRC's Nature Series

VIRGINIA OPOSSUM

LATIN NAME: *Didelphis virginiana*
SPECIES STATUS: Least Concern
SIZE (from nose to tail): Avg. 2.5 FT
LIFESPAN: Up to 2 years in the wild

ACCOMPLISHED TREE CLIMBERS- they are aided by a **prehensile tail** that is used as an extra limb, and opposable thumbs (called **hallux**) on their rear limbs, both specialized for gripping.

NATURAL IMMUNITY- Opossums are mostly **immune to rabies**, likely due to having low body temperature.

SHARP MEMORY- When tested for the ability to remember where food is, opossums **scored better** than rats, rabbits, cats, dogs!

PEST CONTROL- Opossums keep **rats** and **cockroaches** at bay by competing with them for food, and often killing them.



Photo by: L. Scott Campbell

Opossums are **NORTH AMERICA'S ONLY MARSUPIAL** -mammals that carry and nurse their young in pouches-.

LYME DISEASE CONTROL- Each opossum can eat over **5,000 ticks/season**. Which means, the more opossums in your area, the fewer ticks you'll encounter!

Diet includes carrion, rodents, insects, snails, slugs, birds, eggs, frogs, plants, fruits, and grains. An unusually high need for **CALCIUM** incites them to eat the skeletons of what they consume.

"PLAYING 'POSSUM"- The comatose-like state is an **involuntary** reaction triggered by stress, and can last from a minute to 6 hours!

For any wildlife-related concern, please call the LaRC Environmental Office (Peter Van Dyke) at 864-7517
For more outreach items visit environmental.larc.nasa.gov

* Data obtained from National Geographic and Animal Diversity Web



Wide range throughout Central and North America.

First observed by English colonists in Virginia, hence the **species name**.

POISON CONTROL

A molecule in opossum blood completely **NEUTRALIZES** the venom of nearly every type of snake found in their native range!



By isolating the molecule, an **ANTIVENOM** may be developed to help treat the 5 MILLION snakebites that occur worldwide.



DEVOTED MOTHERS

Mother opossums give birth to under-developed offspring (called **JOEYS**) that are as tiny as **honeybees**! They carry the babies in their **pouch** until they're 2 months old, and then on their **backs** until they are old enough to fend for themselves.

NOT UGLY JUST ANCIENT

- Opossum **LINEAGE** was traced back to a sister group of marsupials, the peradectids, which lived at the time of dinosaur extinction (Cretaceous–Paleogene period).
- Research shows that all living marsupials **originated** in North America before spreading south. [Click here to learn more!](#)
- The evolutionary split of opossums from other marsupials occurred about **65 MILLION YEARS** ago. They've retained their ancient 'good looks' for tens of millions of years.