

Wildlife Information -- Opossums

The **Santa Monica Animal Control Division** offers the following information[†] about opossums.

Opossum Facts

- Ⓒ Size of a cat; grey to black fur; black eyes; pink nose, feet and tail; black ears; and pointed nose.
- Ⓒ North America's only marsupial mammal (female has a pouch). The female carries and nurses her young in her marsupium until they are about two to three months old; then they are carried on her back another one to two months whenever they are away from the den. Females have litters up to twice a year. Baby opossums (typically five to eight per litter) are ready to leave and walk around out on their own by four months of age. That's when they are 7 to 9 inches, nose to rump, and weigh about 10 to 16 ounces.
- Ⓒ Solitary and nocturnal: usually slow moving; when frightened and unable to flee may fall into an involuntary shock-like state, "playing 'possum".
- Ⓒ Hiss or growl and show their 50 sharp teeth when frightened; but, in reality, they are gentle and placid -- they prefer to avoid all confrontations and wish to be left alone.
- Ⓒ Omnivorous, and help to maintain a clean and healthy environment. They eat all types of insects, including cockroaches, crickets, and beetles. They catch and eat rats, roof rats, mice, and they consume dead animals of all types (carrion). They like over-ripe fruit, berries, and grapes.
- Ⓒ Adaptable; able to live wherever water, food, and shelter exist. At home in trees; uses its prehensile tail to help stabilize position when climbing -- it does not, however, hang by its tail. Few live beyond one year of age in the environment; can live up to 10 years in captivity. Killed by many predators: dogs, cats, owls, and larger wildlife and by humans (automobiles).

Problems and Solutions

- Ⓒ Opossums are far less of a health risk to you or your children or pets than other wild animals such as skunks and raccoons. By eliminating the opossums, you may create a niche that will be filled by a less desirable species. Rabies and viral diseases (e.g., distemper) are practically unheard of in the opossum.
- Ⓒ Opossums are exceptionally non-aggressive and non-destructive. They will not dig up your lawn, chew wood or wires, or create burrows. They do not "attack" anything that is not a prey animal, and is not threatening them. If you keep prey animals such as birds, rodents, or rabbits, you must keep them secure in their enclosures from any wild animal. Adult cats and adult opossums generally get along together, or ignore one another. Dogs are a serious threat to opossums, but not vice versa.
- Ⓒ Just because you see an opossum around does not mean that they are the ones causing your trouble. Opossums are much less secretive than animals that cause damage, and you are more likely to see them, when it is actually another animal doing the deed. It very unusual for them to be the culprits of any damage to property or lawns.

What attracts opossums to a residence?

- C **Food sources:** Keep garbage covered. What about pet food? Bring cat/dog food in at night. Do you have fruit trees? If so, you may have to keep the fallen fruit picked up. If the opossums are eating under the bird feeder, you may have to stop feeding birds for several weeks. Compost pile? Cover any scraps with LOTS of grass clippings or leaves.
- C **Hiding places:** You may have to clear shrubbery or brush to make the area less inviting.
- C **Security:** Keep your yard well lit all night. Do this for quite awhile so that transient opossums will not consider your property attractive- being nocturnal they *like* darkness. This is one of the most effective things you can do.
- C **Easy access:** Is there a fence, a "run" or path that they use often? You could try blocking those routes. Barriers might include branches or small temporary fences that make it hard for them to get through.

What deters opossums from a residence?

- C Success has been reported encouraging animals to leave a particular place by placing lights or radio during the day when the animal is trying to sleep. Flashing Christmas lights are particularly effective.
- C If there is one particular place that you wish to discourage the animal from coming to, you may try this: Puncture a coffee can in various places, and place inside rags soaked in ammonia. Put the lid on the can and place in the desired area. Use several if necessary, and replenish the ammonia daily. Do not use around babies!
- C If gutters or other vertical surfaces are being climbed, you can try covering them with an 18" high length of sheet metal, or covering the object with vegetable shortening up to an 18" height.

Recipe for Opossum Repellent By Carol Martino
1) 1 whole Spanish onion 2) 1 jalapeno pepper 3) 1 tablespoon cayenne pepper Directions: Chop up the onion and pepper. Mix together and boil in 2 quarts of water for about 20 min. Let cool, and then strain water through a cheesecloth, into a container. Using a garden sprayer, spray any area outside that wild animals or even neighborhood pets are being a nuisance. Process may have to be carried out for a period of two weeks to assure success. This mixture is non-toxic and safe--it will not harm the animal but will succeed in keeping them away.

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