



## Opossum in New Jersey

The Opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) is North America's only marsupial and chronologically is the oldest existing mammal on the continent. When Europeans first colonized America opossums did not occur north of New Jersey or Pennsylvania. As time passed, opossums slowly moved north and westward on the Great Plains. In 1890, opossums were introduced to California and their range spread on the west coast. Today they are currently spreading into the Upper Peninsula of Michigan. Opossums are currently found in North America from Central America and Mexico in the south, through the states of the United States east of the Rocky Mountains, along the west coast of the U.S. and northward up into southwestern Ontario. Opossums thrive just about everywhere being both omnivorous and opportunistic in food habits. The opossum is found throughout New Jersey and is considered both a game animal and a furbearer.

Opossums have a low, heavyset body that to some resembles a large house cat, or to others a giant-sized rat. They have a long head with a pointed snout and a whiskered face. Opossums have scaly appearing, long, tapered tails. The color of the opossum varies by the region with northern populations having thick underfur that is white in color and has black tips. The pale guard hairs give the opossum a gray appearance. In the south, the underfur is much sparser. All opossums have white cheek hairs.

Adult opossums generally are between 20 to 40 inches long, including the 10 to 12-inch tail. Opossums will weigh between 4 and 12 pounds and males are larger and heavier than females. Opossums rarely live past 18 months and an opossum that reaches 3 years of age is old indeed.

An opossum's gait is an ungainly shuffle and at top speed they can barely top four miles per hour. They are good climbers and climb using both their feet and their prehensile tails for gripping and balancing. Opossums have five toes on each foot, each with a claw except the long first toe of each hind foot that is capable of grasping, like a thumb.

Opossums generally breed in February and March. After mating the female drives the male away and has no further contact with him. After a gestation of 12 to 13 days and when barely past the embryonic stage, the pink-skinned, hairless, blind newborn opossums "swim" through their mother's fur to the fur-lined pouch on their mother's belly. At this time the young opossums are about ½ inch long and weigh about 0.005 ounces. The front legs of these newborns are developed with claws and the hind legs are rudimentary.

The litter size can vary from about five to thirteen young and average eight. Female opossums usually have 13 mammarys so any young in excess of this number die. The young grow fast and increase their weight about ten times and double their length in seven to ten days. After about eight weeks, the young opossum's eyes open. At about this time they start to leave the pouch for short periods and ride on their mother's back gripping her fur with their claws. By three to four months the young begin to look for their own food and soon they will stop nursing and be on their own. After weaning her first litter, females may breed again and bear a second litter in mid-May to mid-July. Females can breed when they are a year old.

The home range of an adult, female opossum is generally about 270 acres. A female will stay within their home range for their entire lives while males continually shift their home ranges throughout their lives.

Opossums are opportunistic and omnivorous and include a wide variety of food types in their diet. The majority of their diet is composed of insects and carrion. Opossums also will eat many types of plants, including various fruits and grains in season.