

## Species Profile...

### Opossums

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My friend, Charles, thinks opossums are disgusting. He thinks they are mean, ugly, and pesky. Charles normally likes wild animals---he loves the birds, squirrels, rabbits, and even raccoons that show up in his yard. But when it comes to opossums, Charles wishes they would just disappear.

My grandmother didn't like opossums either. She'd get up in the middle of the night, go out to the chicken coop with her flashlight and fire a shotgun at any opossum she found. She used to tell me she couldn't understand why God created opossums.

Poor opossums. Loathsome to most people, they're about as harmless a creature as you can find. It is one of the more interesting, too. Here's what I told Charles about opossums.

Opossums (*Didelphis virginiana*) are the only marsupial species in North America. Central and South America have about 80 marsupial species. Marsupials, like the kangaroos in Australia, are the only mammals that carry their newborn in an abdominal pouch. I explained to Charles that since we only have one representative of a marsupial, we ought to be proud of it.

Opossums have been around for about 80 million years. That means they were here with the dinosaurs, which, as I told Charles, ought to count for something in an opossum's favor. I forgot to say that opossums didn't arrive in North America until 30 million years ago after the dinosaurs had vanished, but my point about their longevity still holds.

The word opossum originates from Captain John Smith, who in 1607 established the first permanent English settlement in North America known as Jamestown. Smith took the word opossum from the Algonquin Indian name, apasum, which means, "white face." I wonder if the Indians saw the similarity between the pale face of Smith and the white face of the opossum. I told Charles he'd better pause before calling an opossum ugly.

Charles said opossums weren't anything like humans, but that's not true. Opossums have opposable thumbs on their rear feet that function like hands for grasping. One of the greatest adaptations in the animal kingdom is opposable thumbs and only opossums, primates and humans have them. That gave Charles pause.

Opossums have a prehensile tail that they use as a fifth limb to balance themselves as they move through trees. However, opossums cannot hang by their tails. Charles told me he had seen pictures in children's books of opossums hanging by their tails. I said that baby opossums might be able to hang by their tails for a few seconds, but the adult body size and weight in proportion to the tail, makes it impossible for an opossum to hang by its tail.

I told Charles that I knew people thought of opossums as ugly, but I never understood why. Opossums are the size of a cat, have grayish-black fur, coal black eyes, and a pointed pink nose. They have 50 teeth, a larger set of teeth than any other mammal.



Opossums flash those abundant teeth when they're cornered or frightened. That behavior makes people like Charles think the animal's going to jump up and attack.

The opossum definitely wants you to be afraid of his teeth. But it's a bluff meant to scare you away. Opossums have another famous bluff---they pretend to be dead. That's where we get the expression, "playing 'possum," to describe someone feigning illness to get out of a chore. Charles said his teenage boy was a master at playing 'possum.

Opossums are harmless to humans. They can't jump up and bite you. In fact, they won't bite you unless you grab them. Even if one does bite you, you're probably better off than if your household cat bites you because opossums carry fewer diseases than cats, or even dogs, goats, horses, cattle, and sheep. Opossums also have a greater resistance to rabies than any other wild or domestic animal living around you.

More amazingly, opossums are immune to the venom of most pit vipers like rattlesnakes, copperheads, and cottonmouths. Scientists are studying the opossum's ability to neutralize venom, as well as their resistance to rabies, in hopes of learning how to enhance the immune system in humans. Meanwhile, opossums go about eating venomous snakes with alacrity. Charles, who's terrified of snakes, started to see the beauty of opossums.

I had to tell Charles that opossums eat almost anything. Snails, slugs, insects, rats, fruits, vegetables, leftover barbecue---you name it. They thrive on cockroaches, which should make all of us glad. But, as my grandmother knew, they also eat eggs and small chicks. They eat small mammals, and they even eat carrion. Opossums are not particular about their cuisine.

Opossums are not territorial. They act like vagabonds, moving from one food source to another. I told Charles that an opossum in his attic was not there to take up residence. Opossums move on once they've exhausted a food supply and had a good rest.

Opossums in the wild don't live much longer than a year. Humans deliberately run over them in cars, dogs attack them, and owls prey on them. Even in captivity, opossums age more rapidly than do other mammals, although the reason is not known. Charles began to feel sympathy toward these poor, "ugly" creatures.

The opossum's short life span and high mortality rate is offset by its prolific breeding. A female may give birth to 22 babies, but only six to eight will survive as part of her litter. A typical female will have two litters a year. Babies are born 13 days after conception and are as small as honeybees. They crawl into their mother's pouch and attach themselves to the mother's teats for 60 days. After that, the young ride on their mother's back for a couple of months before striking out on their own. Charles, a former football linebacker, got a soft look in his face on hearing about opossum babies.

Charles told me I had convinced him that opossums were "pretty good animals," but he still thought they were ugly. That's fine. Ugliness is, after all, in the eye of the beholder.

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