

# Ohio Division of Wildlife Life History Notes Opossum

**Scientific Name:** *Didelphis virginiana*



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## Introduction

The opossum is North America's only marsupial – a mammal that carries its underdeveloped young in a pouch until they are capable of living independently. It is also one of the oldest and most primitive species of mammal in North America. This animal is little changed from its ancestors of 70 million years ago.

Opossums were probably rare in the vast forests of unsettled Ohio, but began to take hold as the land was cleared for agriculture. Today they are found in every county of the state, and slightly more abundant in southern Ohio.

## Description

An adult opossum is about the size of a large house cat, with coarse grizzled grayish fur. It has a long, scaly tail, ears without fur, and a long, pointed snout that ends in a pink nose.

## Habitat and Habits

Farmland is preferred habitat for the opossum, especially wooded pastures adjacent to a lake, stream, marsh, or swamp. This affinity can contribute to outbreaks of *Equine Protozoal Myelitis (EPM)*. Horses across the country, and particularly in the Midwest and South have contracted the disease which results in neurological problems including lack of coordination and awareness of limb placement. The opossum is the carrier of the protozoa, passed through its feces, causing this ailment. There is no cure for this disease which is often left undiagnosed as its symptoms mimic other problems and ultimately

it can be fatal to the horse. Horse owners should consider allowing hunters and trappers permission to take these animals on their property during legal seasons as a precautionary effort.

Opossums are quite adaptable and can also be found in suburbia and the city. Their ideal habitat, however, is an area with woods, wetlands and farmland interspersed. The den is usually situated in a wooded area near water. The opossum is an opportunist that will take shelter anywhere it can stay dry and safe from predators. It often uses the deserted dens of other animals, brush piles, tree holes or openings under old buildings as shelter.

The opossum's best known behavior is that of "playing possum." When threatened, the opossum may hiss and bare its teeth. More likely, though, it will roll over and lay motionless, appearing to be dead. When the danger is past, the possum "revives" and resumes its activities.

## Reproduction and Care of the Young

Opossums are polygamous, meaning males mate with more than one female and play no role in rearing the young. A female opossum carries her young approximately two weeks before they are born. Opossums are undeveloped, and tiny (1/15 ounce) at birth. The offspring must crawl to a nipple in the mother's pouch to survive. The nipple will swell in the offspring's mouth, providing a secure attachment and



constant food supply for two months. At about three months of age, young opossums emerge from the pouch for short periods and will hitch a ride on the mother's back to get from place to place. In several days to a week the young leave the "nest" for good.

### **Management Plans**

The Ohio Division of Wildlife doesn't manage habitat specifically for opossums. However, opossums can be found throughout the state and at many wildlife areas where suitable habitat exists. The management activities that occur on these areas and elsewhere around the state are designed to benefit opossums and a host of other wildlife species. Each year wildlife biologists evaluate data and establish hunting and trapping season dates and bag limits for opossums.

### **Viewing Opportunities**

Opossums are found throughout Ohio. The best chance of seeing them is where farmland, wetlands, and woods merge. Five of Ohio's officially designated "Watchable Wildlife" areas are good places to see opossums: Lake Isaac Waterfowl Sanctuary, Delaware Wildlife Area, Irwin Prairie State Nature Preserve, Ottawa National Wildlife Refuge, and Spencer Lake Wildlife Area.

### **Do Something Wild!**

The Division of Wildlife manages for wildlife diversity in the state. We attempt to create and/or conserve the habitat that will support as wide a diversity of wildlife as possible. Many species like the opossum are hunted and trapped in the state, but many more are not. The Division has a special program to manage and research non-game species that is supported by the generous citizens of the state of Ohio. With money either donated through the state income tax check-off, by the purchase of wildlife license plates, or direct contributions to the Endangered Species Special Account, the Division is able to purchase critical habitat that is essential to sustaining many species of wildlife and to implement special efforts like the reintroduction of the osprey and the trumpeter swan to the state.

Contributions to our Wildlife Diversity Program are accepted throughout the year. To make a donation, please send a check to: Endangered Species Special Account, Ohio Division of Wildlife, 2045 Morse Road, Building G, Columbus, Ohio 43229. All contributions, whether made on your income tax return or directly, are tax deductible.

## At a Glance

**Mating:** Polygamous

**Peak Breeding Activity:** February-March, but can run from January-October

**Gestation:** 12 – 13 days

**Young are Born:** Peak is March-April, but can be as long as February-November

**Litter Size:** 5-25; average is 9

**Young Leave Parents:** At 3 months

**Number of Litters Per Year:** 1-3; 1 is typical in Ohio

**Adult Weight:** 4-15 lbs.; 5 is average

**Adult Length:** 15-20 inches

**Life Expectancy:** 1-2 years; 7 is maximum known

**Migration Patterns:** Year-round resident; individuals wander widely with a home range of 15-40 acres

**Typical foods:** Omnivorous. Will eat carrion, insects, fish, reptiles, eggs, fruits, vegetables, and nuts

**Native to Ohio:** Yes

