

Opossums

Prepared by the National Wildlife Control Training Program. <http://WildlifeControlTraining.com>

Research-based, certified wildlife control training programs to solve human – wildlife conflicts.

One source for training, animal handling and control methods, and wildlife species information.



Figure 1. Opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) with young. Photo by Dave Schmidt.

Species Overview

Conflicts

Opossums (*Didelphis virginiana*) can damage garden produce and may be a nuisance in garbage cans and compost piles. They are a host for a disease that can kill horses, and may carry fleas and ticks.

Legal Status

In South Carolina, opossums are legally classified as a furbearer and can be taken by hunting or trapping during the open season. The season for trapping these animals is December 1 through March 1. Hunting season varies by game zone and even has an established season for running dogs. Anyone planning to trap opossums should be familiar with the regulations which govern this activity. Information on these regulations can be obtained online at: <http://www.dnr.sc.gov>.

A nuisance opossum can also be taken year-round with a **Depredation Permit**. A depredation permit is not required when controlling nuisance opossums within 100 yards of a property owner's residence. This permit is issued by the S.C. Department of Natural Resources. To obtain a permit call your local wildlife management office or law enforcement field office. For further information: <http://www.dnr.sc.gov>

Identification

Opossums (Figure 1) are the only marsupials (pouched mammals such as kangaroos and wombats) in North America. The color of their fur ranges from snow-white to jet-black. The underfur is dense with sparse guard hairs. Its tail is rat-like, hairless, and slightly less than half the total length of the opossum. The tail is moderately prehensile.

Physical Description

Opossums are about the same size as house cats, but can grow to a length of 40 inches. In northern climates, however, tail length may be shorter due to frostbite. Opossums may weigh up to 14 pounds, but the average weight is 4 to 12 pounds, with males generally larger than females. The face is long and pointed with a skull that is usually 3 to 4 inches long and holds 50 teeth, more than any other mammal in North America.

Species Range

Opossums are found in eastern, central, and west coast states. They do not occur in the Rockies, most western plains states, and parts of the northern United States.

Health and Safety Concerns

Opossums often harbor parasites such as fleas and ticks. They are more resistant to rabies than any other mammal, although they are not completely immune.

General Biology, Reproduction, and Behavior

Reproduction

Opossums are solitary, except when mating or caring for young. Female opossums usually raise two litters per year. Young are born blind, hairless, and helpless 13 days after mating. When young are born, they find their way into the female's pouch, where they each attach to one of 13 teats. About 23 young are born, but only those that attach to a teat survive. The rest quickly perish. The average litter size is 7 to 8. They remain in the pouch for 7 to 8 weeks, and are not weaned until 96 to 108 days after birth. Most young die during their first year, and opossums may live 2 to 3 years in the wild.

Nesting/Denning Cover

Opossums do not dig their own burrows, but will use burrows abandoned by other animals. Other den sites include tree cavities, brush piles, rock crevices, and abandoned squirrel nests. Opossums sometimes den under homes, in attics, and in garages where they may make messy nests.

Behavior

Opossums are usually solitary and nomadic, with a home range of 10 to 50 acres. They have a top running speed of 3.5 miles per hour, and escape predators by entering burrows, climbing trees, or swimming. When threatened, opossums may bare their teeth, growl, hiss, bite, screech, and exude a yellow-green fluid from the anal glands that smells mildly like skunk musk. An opossum may "play dead" by rolling on its back and going limp, sometimes with the tongue hanging out of its mouth.

Opossums do not hibernate. During very cold weather, they enter dens for short periods until temperatures warm. Although primarily nocturnal, they may forage during the day, especially in cold weather.

Habitat

Opossums live in a wide range of habitats, from arid to moist, and wooded to open fields. Opossums prefer environments near streams or swamps. They take shelter in burrows of other animals, tree cavities, brush piles, and other cover.

Food Habits

Opossums are opportunistic omnivores. They eat animals and plants, including insects, worms, snakes, lizards, mice, rats, grasses, fruits, and vegetables. Opossums may feed at compost piles, garbage cans, or pet food dishes. Opossums may be considered beneficial because they feed on insects, mice, and rats. They readily take carrion, and often are hit by vehicles while feeding on road-killed animals.

Voice, Sounds, Tracks, and Signs

When frightened, opossums hiss, growl, screech, and bare their teeth, depending on the level of threat that they perceive. Males and females signal each other with a clicking sound during the breeding season.

Damage Identification

Signs of opossum damage may be confused with those of skunks or raccoons. Often, seeing an opossum is the only way to confirm its presence.

Damage to Landscapes

Opossums consume garden produce and tree fruits. They also may feed on food scraps in compost piles.

Damage to Crops and Livestock

Opossums generally do not cause crop losses. Also, they typically avoid pets and livestock. Opossums may prey on chickens, ducks, pigeons, and eggs. Opossums can carry the microorganism that causes Equine Protozoan Myeloencephalitis (EPM), which kills horses. The protozoan is shed in feces, so an opossum that dens or feeds in a stable area may contaminate feed and water used for horses.

Damage to Structures

Opossums may enter trailer houses and climb into insulation under the floor. They often are encountered moving about in the ductwork of mobile homes. Opossums are not destructive or strong, so they typically enter areas where an opening already exists. They commonly enter living quarters through large gaps around pipes and drains under sinks. In contrast, raccoons are powerful and often create openings.

Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Habitat Modification

Remove pet food, fruits, and other foods that might attract opossums. Opossums eat birdseed, so hang a bird feeder on a wire between trees, or on a baffled pole to prevent raiding. Reduce the amount of seed that falls to the ground by using one type of seed per feeder and using feeders that recapture fallen seed.

Secure lids on trash cans and enclose compost piles in bins. Only place non-food plant materials (e.g., leaves and grass clippings) in compost piles to avoid attracting opossums, skunks, raccoons, and other scavengers.

Exclusion

Install sunken perimeter fences around crawl spaces below decks or buildings. Cover structure openings with hardware cloth. Use electric fences or porcupine-wire to prevent climbing. Install one-way doors (6- x 6-inch) to

evict opossums from buildings. Once they leave a structure, they will not be able to re-enter.

Frightening Devices

Frightening devices are not practical for dispersing opossums. However, dogs may discourage opossums from visiting an area.

Repellents

No repellents are registered for opossums.

Toxicants

No toxicants are registered for opossums.

Shooting

Legal hunting season on private lands for opossums varies by game zone in South Carolina. Check the Rules and Regulations for your game zone for the specific season. A free depredation permit for nuisance opossums may be issued to landowners outside of the hunting season or who do not possess a hunting license.

Opossums may be hunted at night; however, they may not be hunted with artificial lights except when treed or cornered with dogs and no buckshot or any shot larger than #4, or any rifle ammunition larger than a twenty-two rimfire may be used. Devices that amplify light using any type of power source are considered artificial light (including night vision or thermal imaging equipment).

Go to www.dnr.sc.gov for specific furbearer rules and regulations.

Check local ordinances before discharging a firearm.

Trapping

In South Carolina, the legal trapping season is December 1 – March 1 for licensed trappers, however a private landowner may apply for a free depredation permit outside of the regular trapping season or if they do not have a trapping license. Permits can be obtained from

any South Carolina DNR office or conservation officer.

Furbearer Trapping regulations can be obtained online at www.dnr.sc.gov.

Opossums are relatively unwary and easy to trap. In suburban areas, cage traps (e.g., 10 x 12 x 32 single door, or 7 x 7 x 24 double-door) are preferred for capturing opossums. Use cat food, fruit, or marshmallows as bait. Body-gripping traps (Nos. 160 or 220) and foothold traps (Nos. 1 or 1½ padded jaw trap) also can be used to capture an opossum in rural areas where pets are not at risk.

Other Methods

Opossums are easy to corner in enclosed areas and can be captured with catch poles, cat-graspers or hand nets. Do not grasp an opossum by the tail. You can hand-capture an opossum while wearing gloves by grasping the back of the neck and using the other hand to support the back. Opossums usually will relax when restrained. Trained dogs can be used to locate opossums (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Dogs may help locate opossums. Photo by Dave Schmidt.

Disposition

Relocation

Relocation of is not permitted in South Carolina.

Translocation

Translocation is not permitted in South Carolina.

Euthanasia

Carbon dioxide gas is the most appropriate technique to euthanize opossums. Opossums also can be humanely killed with a gunshot to the head, if legal and safe in your area.

Web Resources

Government or private agencies, universities, extension service.

<http://dnr.sc.gov>

<http://wildlifecontroltraining.com>

<http://icwdm.org/>

<http://wildlifecontrol.info>

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