

COLUMNISTS

Meet the opossum, nature's friendly sanitation worker

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Most of us have heard the phrase “playing possum,” whether we know what a possum is or not.

What many Americans call a possum is in fact an opossum. While that “o” might not seem like a big deal, it is.

In the United States, our opossums are unique because they are the only marsupial north of Mexico. A possum is a different type of animal found in Australia, New Zealand and China.

While there are over 60 opossum species in the world, there is only one in North America – the Virginia Opossum.

Most people assume opossums are related to rodents because of their vaguely rat-like appearance. In fact, as a marsupial, they are more closely related to a kangaroo or koala bear.

Marsupial species carry their young around with them in a pouch to nurse and develop. Opossums’ gestation period is between 11-13 days and at birth they are so small that 20 opossum “joeys” could fit in a teaspoon.

After they have grown enough to fill the pouch, they will ride on their mother’s back until they are sufficiently developed to live on their own.

The lifespan of these interesting critters is unfortunately only one to two years in the wild. Many species, such as dogs, cats and even humans, prey on opossums.

Opossums’ toothy grins have 50 teeth – a record for any land mammal in the United States. The house cat-sized adults are not aggressive but showing those sharp teeth, hissing and growling are their first fierce-looking line of defense when facing a predator.

“Playing possum” comes from another of the opossums’ defensive tactics – pretending to be dead. This reflex is completely involuntary, and the ensuing paralysis can last anywhere from a few minutes to several hours. Their breathing slows, mouth drools, anal glands release a foul smelling green slime and bodies stiffen. This defensive trait works well because most predator animals assume dead prey animals are diseased and will often leave the catatonic opossum alone.

Opossums play an important role in our ecosystem because their diet consists of insects, rodents, poisonous snakes, grubs, frogs, carrion and overripe fruits and vegetables. This helps mankind in many ways.

They love to eat ticks that carry Lyme disease (among many other diseases). They also eat cockroaches we would rather not have in our yards, even though cockroaches serve an important role in the food web. Opossums also eat rats and mice which carry many diseases affecting the human population. They eat overripe and rotting fruits and vegetables from your garden that could otherwise attract unwanted pests and plant disease.

All of these beneficial eating habits earn opossums the nickname of nature’s sanitation workers.

One very cool fact: they are one of the oldest living species on the planet – they wandered the Earth when dinosaurs were alive. The species is believed to be more than 70 million years old.

While opossums are generally nocturnal, there are several reasons why you might see one during the day: blindness, lack of food to forage, extreme weather and very occasionally sickness. If you see one during the day don’t jump to the conclusion that it is diseased.

Even though they are such beneficial animals, they don’t do well in captivity as pets. To own a fur-bearing, wild animal in Texas you would need a wildlife rehabilitation permit. Captivity can cause health problems that are diet or exercise related and it is difficult to find a qualified vet for wild animals. If you should find a young opossum joey in your yard, a good information source is dfwwildlife.org.

Don’t let their fierce looks deceive you. Opossums are one of the least dangerous animals you are likely to encounter. They are immensely beneficial to mankind and play an important role in our ecosystem. So the next time you see one, give it a friendly wave and let it move on to its “all-you-can-eat bug buffet”!

Jared Rhoton, is a certified Texas master naturalist. The Texas Master Naturalist program is sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife and the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. More information is available online at txmn.tamu.edu/about.