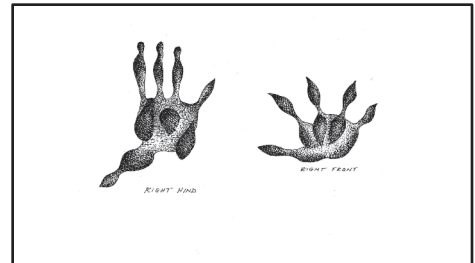
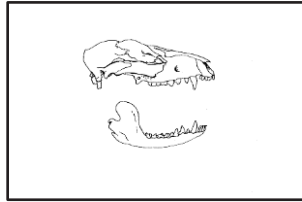
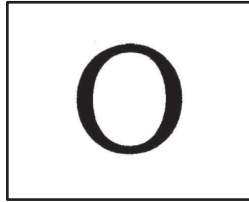
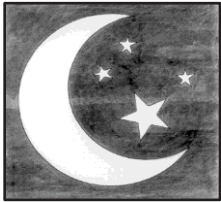




Opossum

Order Marsupialia

Didelphis virginiana



One of the world's oldest living mammals, and the only marsupial found in North America, the **Opossum** thrives throughout Pennsylvania. Like the raccoon, its name is rooted in native America language. The Algonquin Indians called these creatures "apasums," meaning "white animals."

They are not aggressive, do not have sharp claws or nasty teeth and are not much larger than a large house cat. Yet somehow they survive predators and weather that would send less well-adapted animals to the brink of disaster.

Their brains are small, and as mammal brains go, they are considered primitive. But **the opossum has developed some unique survival techniques.** The best known is their tendency to "play 'possum" or feign death when a predator, or even just a curious child, prevents them from escaping up a tree or hiding in nearby brush. At first the opossum may growl, hiss or click its teeth. They are also capable of releasing a musky odor. But when all else fails, the opossum will drop to the ground, lie motionless with its eyes staring blankly, its mouth open and tongue limp (below left). It's a very convincing display of sudden death. This "death act" may last from a few minutes to several hours as the opossum tries to survive an attack. The behavior has proven to be quite successful since many predators ignore what they consider dead prey.



Masters of Survival

They don't look like they could possibly survive our cold winters with their hairless ears and tail, and **frostbite is a common problem** for opossums.

They are the only marsupials found on our continent. **Most marsupials** (like the kangaroo) are native to much warmer climates such as Australia and South America.

Physically, **opossums have changed little over the past millions of years**, slowly migrating up through and across North America.

Despite their southern origins, **opossums do not hibernate** to escape the cold or even grow a winter pelt. Instead they grow only a thin layer of fat and den up during cold or snowy periods.

It seems as though the deck is stacked against them, but opossums continue to survive and their numbers continue to grow. **They are considered a common species in PA.**

The opossum is classified as a **furbearer** in Pennsylvania and can be found on farmlands, woodlands and fields. They also live in suburbs and at the edges of populated areas if food and cover are available. But **their ideal habitat is described as the bottomland woods that border streams.**

Opossums wander in search of food. The same wildlife management techniques that benefit our large game animals, such as deer and black bear, benefit opossums, too. Thinning the forests and planting edge zones with low-growing, food-producing plants (blackberries, wild grapes, etc.) and creating thick cover for escape or rest help their populations. Preserving dead trees with hollow limbs is important for the shelter cavities they prefer as well.

Opossums are not rats, no matter what their tail looks like. The tail of an opossum is indeed hairless and scaly, like most rat tails. But the opossum's tail is different. Many animals use their tail for balance as they run - picture a cheetah chasing down a gazelle on the African savannah. But the opossum uses its tail to help it climb trees.

Opossums have a prehensile tail. The term prehensile means "able to grasp." Some animals with a **prehensile tail** can grasp objects. Some find and eat food in the trees by using their tails. Opossum tails are only partially prehensile and are used to anchor their body to a branch or dangle from a tree limb as an aid to climbing.



Among the many physical characteristics found among Pennsylvania's mammals, none is more unique than the **marsupial** features of the opossum, which they share with the kangaroos of Australia (above right). Litters are born in late winter and again in early to mid-summer. The marsupials are not fully developed - their gestation having only lasted a mere 12–13 days. The barely recognizable young are hairless, pink and blind. **Only one-half inch in length and weighing only 0.005 ounces, the babies use claws on their front feet to crawl up the mother's fur to a pouch in the skin of her belly.** The pouch is lined with fur and contains 13 mammary glands, which the young opossums attach to and begin to nurse. Once attached, each infant will stay attached to a nipple for almost two months. Any litter larger than 13 will result in excess dead. During nursing, the mother can close her pouch to keep her young from falling out.

Most litters vary from five to 13 young, averaging eight. The young grow rapidly, and by eight to nine weeks their eyes open and they let go of the mammary glands for the first time. They begin leaving the pouch for short periods, riding atop their mother's back and gripping her fur with their claws. At three to four months, young opossums begin to look for their own food and begin to care for themselves. Soon they stop nursing, but they may stay with the female a few weeks longer.



A Simple Review of Opossums

The opossum belongs to the **Order Marsupialia**. They are the only **marsupials** in North America. A marsupial is a mammal that gives birth to its young in a pouch outside the mother's belly. Kangaroos—who live in Australia—are marsupials, too. The opossum may also be called a 'possum, a "grinner" or even a "monkey rat."

Opossums are about the size of large house cats and males are heavier than females. An adult opossum is about 24–40 inches long. That includes a naked, scaly tail that is about 10 to 12 inches long. Their long tail is called a **prehensile tail**. That means it can hold on to certain objects like tree branches to help them climb. Opossums are both **terrestrial** and **arboreal**—they spend time both on land and in trees. Opossums are excellent climbers.

Opossums have more teeth than any other mammal in Pennsylvania. They have 50! You have about 32. Those teeth help them eat just about anything. Because they feed on both plants and animals, we call them **omnivores**. They especially love to scavenge. They are like the garbagemen of their habitats. Each of their four legs has dark fur and each foot has five toes. **The first toe of each foot is long, clawless and able to grasp like your thumb. All their remaining toes have claws.**

They have a **good sense of smell**, and **those really long whiskers help them "touch" their surroundings**, especially at night. They are **nocturnal**. They have light gray with long coarse hair with small dark eyes and naked ears. **Their eyesight and hearing are weak.** When a 'possum wants to take a closer look at something it sometimes stands on its hind feet to get a better look around.



Opossums walk slowly and awkwardly, but they can swim and even though they are slow, they are pretty good swimmers. Everything an opossum does is slow. **Because they cannot move very fast to escape danger, they pretend they are dead** when they are frightened. This is called **"Playing Possum."** If they cannot climb a tree or find some brush to hide in, 'possums will drop over on their side as if dead. There they will stay—perfectly still—hoping whatever threatens them leaves. This behavior usually works since many predators are not interested in something dead and may leave the "dead" opossum unharmed.



Females have as many as 13 young in late winter and again mid-summer. At birth these marsupial babies crawl up their mother's belly into her warm, fur-lined pouch. They nurse inside the pouch for about two months. After two months the baby 'possums leave the pouch for exercise by crawling atop the mother's body, always clinging to her fur for protection. Once they reach three to four months of age they can start feeding themselves.