

Marsupial in Maine: Opossum

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If Australia and kangaroos come to mind when you think of marsupials, you are correct. But Maine has one - the Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginianus*). Marsupials are mammals that do not give birth to fully developed young. The young are instead born when they are extremely tiny and must then crawl to the mother's pouch. There, they will suckle milk and continue to grow for many weeks.

Baby opossums, called pups or pinkies at birth, are no bigger than a honeybee. Curled up on their side, they are no larger round than a dime and weigh in at approximately .13 grams. This is less than a dime, which weighs 2.268 grams (0.080 ounces)!

After a week in their mother's pouch, their birth weight will have increased by ten times.

After two months, they are mouse-size and will begin exploring briefly outside the pouch. In another month, they will spend more time outside the pouch and may be carried on their mother's back. They cling tightly to her fur with their hand-like feet and grasping tails.



Opossum are skilled tree climbers. Photo by Kim Chandler.



Photo by Bill Peterson, United States Fish & Wildlife Service

The night-active (nocturnal) opossum is not a fussy eater. It prefers to stay close to its den but may roam up to two miles nightly in search of food. While ambling along trails near a wetland or stream, it will look for insects, worms, frogs, plants, and seeds to eat. Roads, also visited during the nighttime, are sources of dead animals that the opossum will eat. Unfortunately, the slow-moving opossum may become roadkill itself when feeding along roadways.

Dens are made anywhere it is safe, warm and dry - often in an abandoned burrow or tree hollow. Dried leaves, grasses, and mosses are

collected for the den and carried in the opossum's curled tail to the nest. There they will be used to thickly line the den against cold weather. This is very important because opossum do not have thick fur or large fat reserves to keep them warm.

Interesting Facts

- Opossum can hang upside down from a branch by just their tail! The tail is prehensile – meaning it can be used to grab and hang on to things, such as tree branches.
- The tail is also used for balance; when an opossum runs the tail rotates in a circle.
- "Playing possum" is when an opossum plays dead in order to escape being eaten by a predator. It falls to its side, releases a foul-smelling scent, and opens its mouth with curled-back lips. Predators often walk away after seeing this ruse.
- Has 50 teeth - more than any other mammal.
- Immune to snake bites, bee stings, and other toxins. Although opossums are prone to frost bite, they do not hibernate.
- Opossums expanded their range from southern states and into Maine during the 1900s. Most opossum in Maine are in the southern portion of the state. Cold winters limit their expansion northward.

Activities for Children & the Young at Heart

1. If you had a prehensile tail, where would you choose to hangout?
2. Find out how much you weighed at birth and multiply by 10. Did you weigh this much at one week old? Imagine how large a week-old opossum you would be!
3. Try a Playing Possum version of Duck, Duck, Goose. The game is now called Opossum, Opossum, Fox! Sit in circle. One player is selected to be the Opossum to walk outside the circle and say Opossum, Opossum at the back of each player, until... the Opossum stops behind a seated player and yells, Fox! The seated player must jump up and chase the Opossum around the circle and back to its starting place. The Opossum must stay ahead of the Fox, run into the circle at the starting point, and drop to the ground to Play Possum. A Fox that catches (or you can play gets back inside the circle first) is the next Opossum outside the circle. An Opossum that survives by making it into the circle and playing possum can decide to remain as Opossum for one more round or select a new Opossum.

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- [Jocelyn Hubbell](#), Interpretive Specialist, Maine Bureau of Parks and Lands.