

Opossums

Urban Wildlife Damage Control

The Virginia Opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) is a medium-sized animal with long, rather coarse fur; a sharp slender muzzle; prominent, thin, naked ears; short legs all about the same length; and a long grasping tail covered with scales and scant hairs. Opossums are in the family Marsupialia, which comes from a Latin word meaning "pouch" and refers to the pouch on the belly of the females. Young opossums are born incompletely formed and are carried in this pouch while they continue their growth and development.

Biology and Habits

Although most opossums are gray, there are several other color phases: Some are black, some are brown and a few are white. Generally, the nose is pink, the eyes are black and the ears are bluish-black. The tail is gray and the feet and toes are pink to white.

Adults range in length from 24 to 34 inches and weigh from 4 to 15 pounds. In Kansas, the breeding season begins about the first of February. Gestation takes only 12 to 13 days. The first litter is weaned in May, and the female mates again. The second litter is weaned around mid- to late September. The average number of young per litter is nine, varying from 5 to 13.

Opossums need watering areas nearby. Although they seem to wander aimlessly, radio transmitter studies indicate that some opossums live their entire lives on as little as 40 acres.

Opossums are omnivorous, which means they eat a wide variety of foods including carrion, crayfish, frogs, tadpoles, clams and berries.

Laws and Regulations

Opossums are classified as fur-bearers under Kansas statutes. Problem opossums can be controlled without a

permit under conditions listed in KSA 32-1002 which states:

"Kansas law does not prevent owners or legal occupants of land from killing any animals found in or near buildings on their premises, or when found destroying property, subject to the following:

(A) the provisions of federal laws and regulations governing protected species and provisions of the Kansas nongame and endangered species conservation act are met;

(B) it is unlawful to use or possess with intent to use, and animal so killed unless authorized by rules and regulations of the secretary; and

(C) such owners or legal occupants shall make reasonable efforts to alleviate their problems with any such animals before killing them."

Opossums can also be taken by hunting or trapping during the regular season.

Urban Opossum Problems

Generally, opossums do not cause humans much trouble. They live in urban and suburban habitats and sometimes get into basements, attics, sheds and garages. Often, they are injured or killed by automobiles as they cross highways.

Opossums are known to host parasites such as mites, ticks, lice, fleas, roundworms, flukes and tapeworms.



They may also spread fungal, bacterial, and viral diseases.

Opossums are not aggressive and flee when pursued. A common defense is pretending to be dead, or "playing 'possum." The frightened animal rolls over, becomes limp and shuts its eyes, coming back to life at the first opportunity to escape.

Opossum Management

Opossums are not wary of live traps and are easily captured. Almost any kind of bait will attract opossums into a live trap. Fish, fresh fruit or cat food work best. A live trap measuring 12 by 12 by 36 inches is big enough to capture the largest opossum.

For more information about opossum damage control write to Animal Damage Control, Room 128 Call Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas 66505-1600.

Also, watch for the publication, *Sources of Wildlife Damage Control Supplies*, Rural and Urban, to be published later.

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