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The Marsupial Opossum

The opossum is the only marsupial species on the North American continent. The young are born prematurely and allowed to mature in their mother's pouch. They are extremely small and blind when born and must crawl their way up to a teat on the mother's abdomen and latch on. The mother is actually able to pump milk into them as the newborns lack the ability to suckle. She nurses them until they are old enough to be on their own. The possum is also the only mammal with a prehensile tail that can be used for grasping things like a branch, or a human hand. Young opossums sometimes hang by their tails but when they are grown up they are too heavy for hanging.

The possum is the only mammal that has four opposable fingers on each of their hind feet, which work like a thumb making it possible to pick things up better than most other animals. A possum can grow up to be as big as a full-grown cat, and resembles a silver-colored rat with its naked ears and silver fur coat. Their face is almost pure white with four whiskers and a pink nose. The eyes look like two black shoe buttons.

The average adult grows to be about twenty-four to twenty-six inches long including the tail and usually weighs six to twelve pounds. It is usually a passive animal but can look ferocious when it displays all fifty teeth (the most for any land mammal) while drooling and hiss-



ing at any person near it. They are also normally nocturnal but can be comfortable in daylight when searching for food. Their ideal habitat is either woodland or farmland or even suburban neighborhoods with water nearby. Possums are omnivorous, eating whatever they can catch including small mammals like rats, mice, moles, insects and grubs, or toads and frogs. They'll also frequent garbage, fruit, corn, berries, and even road-killed carcasses.

Their own deaths on our roads during the darkness adds up to thousands of casualties per year. Any possum tends to freeze in the nighttime headlights of an automobile.

Perhaps their most intriguing strategy is the sudden ability to play dead when they feel they are in danger. They quickly sink to the ground while their eyes gloss over, baring their teeth and lolling their tongue out of their mouth to one side. They often frighten almost anyone by appearing suddenly dead, "playing possum," however, they rarely cause problems. They are more beneficial as scavengers than harmful for any damage they might possibly do. A neighborhood with opossums tends to be more peaceful and safer than one without them.

— George B. Emmons