



MONTEREY NEWS

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Possum in the News

The possum is back in the paper! One day in mid-June the Berkshire Eagle featured a color photograph of a “huge, handsome opossum” in the B section. It is handsome, all right, with its many long toes splayed out like a hand on the ground, as it nibbles up birdseed under a feeder. The fur is overall grey, but multi-colored with black and white and a tousled look. The nose is pink and pointy, the naked ears a bit pink and a bit black.

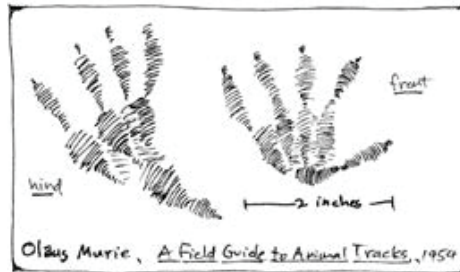
We used to see a possum in the paper every day when I was growing up and his name was Pogo. He walked around on his hind feet, wore a striped shirt, and never appeared in color. As a kid I loved him and his marvelous pals in the Okefenokee Swamp, as drawn by cartoonist Walt Kelly. My parents had a book of Pogo the Possum, and pretty soon they were finding other collections of the comic strip and giving them to me. I got the Pogo Stepmother Goose, the Uncle Pogo So-so Stories, and lots more, making a collection I treasure still.

What has brought the possum back to the paper this summer has nothing to do with the comics. The woman who took the photo wrote a caption that says, “Did you know they can eat a thousand ticks a day?” I looked this up and found it expressed as “up to four thousand ticks a week,” and similar statistics.

This spring, ticks have been an important interest around here and one friend suggested we ought to have free-ranging chickens to gobble them up. Last month’s Eagle lets us appreciate possums as tick gobblers, in case we didn’t already appreciate them for other attributes. One article I read urges us to build opossum nest boxes and take other steps to “transform your property into a Certified Wildlife Garden.”

Further research gives us the picture—possums don’t really go around the certified place, looking for teeny eight-legged creatures to nibble up. Rather the ticks find them, just as they do our dogs and us. With no one to install a tick-toxic collar for them, the possums do their usual careful grooming and dispatch the ticks they find with their many fine sharp teeth. Possums have more teeth per mouth than any other land mammal—fifty! I have watched our dog Russell nibble after a tick that is biting him, and then try the same system of dispatch as the

possum, but dogs don’t have the right teeth for it. As to whether the handsome possum in the paper is really “eating” those thousands of ticks per day or week, it doesn’t matter. The attribute here is tick dispatch.



Here is a list of what possums are known to eat: beetles, bugs, grasshoppers, moles, worms, snakes, fish, frogs, crayfish, birds, eggs, mushrooms, ants, apples, cherries, haw-apples, grain, pokeberries, carrion, and suet. We can add birdseed and ticks. The creature has a cosmopolitan palate. When I was in college we got a grant in my department to study possums and ran what we called “the Possum Project.” We fed the possums the same thing the lab rats got, and they did okay. We stayed up all night and watched them and wrote down what they were doing, which was eating. We were not the scientists who counted the thousands of ticks consumed per day or week. I’m not sure how we could have gotten all those ticks for them.

Taxonomists consider possums to be the most “primitive” of the mammals in these parts. The fossil record shows they were common in this northern bioregion ages ago, but then disappeared. Now they are back, having successfully migrated back north over the last fifty-plus years. The secret to their success? They are adaptable. They do not hibernate, they don’t move very fast, and even with all those teeth they are not aggressive. They can “play possum,” which is the third response to danger in the “fight, flight, or freeze” plan. This may work well in some situations in these modern times, but not in the face of oncoming traffic.

Possums are marsupial, as compared with placental. Their babies are born only days after conception and are so teeny and embryonic that you can see their organs right through their skin and they have no ears nor eyes, and it is said that sixteen baby possums would not fill a teaspoon. We did not check this out during the Possum

Project at my college. These little newborns find their way somehow to their mother’s pouch, where they fasten onto the nipples inside for the next six weeks, when they have a sort of second birth and come outside to ride on the mother’s back, hanging onto her fur with their toes.

They have five toes, just like us, and on the hind feet one toe is like a thumb, widely separated from the other four. It is opposable, and can grip. The track it makes is very like a human handprint.

Should we say “opossum” or “possum?” It doesn’t matter. Either one is fine, and derives from an Algonquian word that had no spelling but which European note-takers back in the day wrote as opossum or aposoum. Some current dictionaries will tell you the first “o” in opossum is silent like the “h” in honor. The original name is said to have meant “white dog” or “white animal.” If we follow this trail too far we may find ourselves singing that crazy old song about the “ogo-pogo,” which could somehow have influenced a brilliant cartoonist when he was naming his possum character.

— Bonner McAllester

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