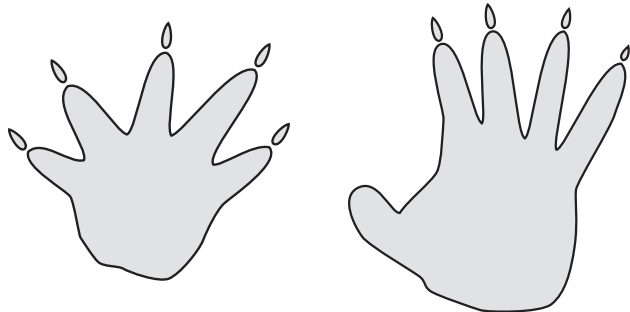


Virginia Opossum

Status

- Bites
- Carries internal & external parasites
- Can transmit pathogens on its body
- Often infested with fleas that can vector pathogenic bacteria, the cause of flea-borne typhus



Opossum tracks.

Right front foot (left), right hind foot (right).

Note the lack of a claw on the inner toe of the hind foot.



General Information

The Virginia opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) is a hairy, heavy-bodied, cat-sized mammal with a large white head, a long narrow snout, black hairless ears, and a long rat-like tail. It walks and climbs with all four limbs and uses its tail to grasp as if it were another hand. Its body fur is gray, about an inch long, and is interspersed with much longer white and gray hairs (about 2.5-3 inches long). It was introduced into California from the southeastern U.S. many years ago and has spread to most coastal and foothill areas of the state. It is now a common resident throughout urban and suburban areas of Orange County and is rarely seen in wilderness areas. Opossums are omnivorous and feed on fruits, nuts, grains, snails, earthworms, insects, reptiles, small mammals, birds and their eggs, garbage, carrion, and even feces.

Life Cycle

About 12 days after mating, the young are born blind and in an embryonic state and must climb up their mother's belly and into her pouch, where they attach to a nipple, feed on milk for 55-60 days, and grow quickly. After 95-105 days, the young are weaned from milk and fed solid food provided by the mother. It is common to see a mother carrying her young while she forages for food. At around 105 days, they leave their mother and strike out on their own. They live a total of two to three years.

What Do They Look Like?

Opossums are marsupials, primitive mammals whose young complete their development in a pouch on the lower portion of their mother's belly. The marsupial group includes familiar animals such as koalas, kangaroos, and wallabies. Marsupials are native to the Australian region, and South, Central, and North America. This is the only marsupial found in the wild in North America.

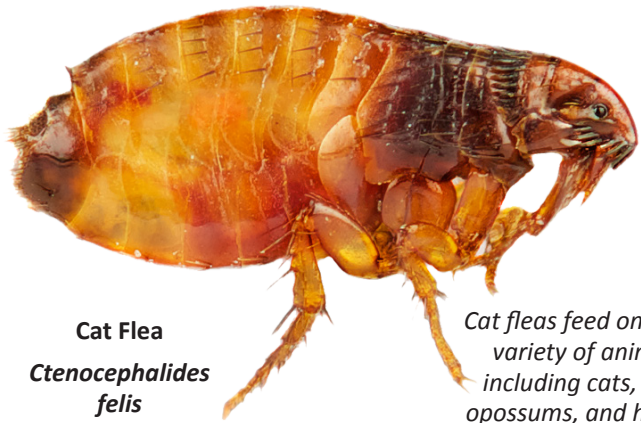
The head and body of an adult Virginia opossum totals about 74 cm (29 inches) long, but ranges from 35 to 94 cm (13-37 inches) long. The tail is another 21-47 cm (8-18 inches) long. Adult males weigh 0.8-6.4 kg (1.8-14 pounds); females weigh 0.3-3.7 kg (0.6-8 pounds). On average, opossums in Orange County weigh 1.8 kg (4 pounds); the largest Orange County opossum on record was 5.9 kg (13 pounds).

Opossums have 50 teeth, the most teeth of any wild mammal in North America (bears, coyotes, and foxes have 42 teeth, humans have 32). Their incisors are small, canines slender and curved, and premolars and molars small and sharp.

Their toes are all-white. Each front foot has five toes that point forward, each back foot has four toes that point forward and one that faces inward, like an opposable thumb. All but the opposable toe are tipped with a claw.

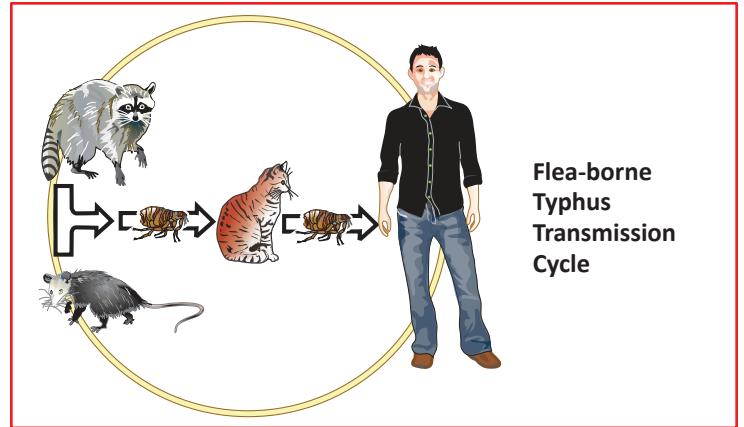
The long tail is hairless and covered in scales; it is muscular and can be used to grasp and climb (said to be a prehensile tail).





Cat Flea
Ctenocephalides felis

Cat fleas feed on a wide variety of animals, including cats, dogs, opossums, and humans



Flea-borne Typhus Transmission Cycle

Human Interactions

Opossums are active mostly at night, when they travel through yards and garbage in search of food. They eat fallen fruit and will climb trees to take fruit from the tree. They are fond of domestic dog and cat food left outside, and of snails that feed on succulent plants in the yard.

They are generally not aggressive and will not attack, but will bite if cornered and harassed. Sometimes, when confronted with danger, they fake their death by falling down and remaining motionless (“play possum”) for a few minutes to several hours.

They often freeze when lit by bright lights from a flashlight or in headlights, often causing them to be struck by a vehicle.

Tips to Exclude & Discourage Opossums

Residents can take a number of preventive measures to discourage opossums from their property. Remove debris, trash, and overgrown plants that opossums may use as shelter. Eliminate potential food sources such as pet food and fallen fruit. Hang bird feeders from a squirrel baffle or use a squirrel-proof feeder; both prevent opossums and squirrels from accessing bird food. Clean up all pet waste and standing water every day.

Opossums climb over fences, often on plants that extend over the fence. Prune plants away from fences and buildings; also prune low-hanging branches well above the ground.

Tree trunks can be outfitted with sheet metal cone collars (they look like the cone collars for dogs, to keep them from biting themselves); opossums, squirrels, and rats cannot climb over them. Stack lumber and firewood at least 18” above the ground and 6” away from walls, fences, and other structures. Keep perimeter areas weed-free. Secure garbage, recyclables, and compost in containers with tight-fitting lids. Seal openings under and into the home and outbuildings, to prevent opossums from nesting and resting there.

Opossums are often afraid of dogs; if you have a dog, give it access to your yard and opossums might leave. Keep your pets on flea medication to protect them from flea-borne diseases.

Health Risks

Virginia opossums often carry a heavy load of fleas. Surveys performed recently in Orange County have found individuals with over 700 fleas! As opossums travel, some of their fleas jump off and feed on other animals; thus, opossums spread fleas throughout neighborhoods. Fleas may be infected with bacteria and viruses (pathogens), acquired by feeding on the blood of an infected host animal. While feeding on the host animal’s blood, the infected flea defecates digestive wastes and bacteria. If the host animal scratches the bite site, it can physically move the feces and bacteria into the wound and bloodstream, and infect itself. Transfer of bacteria also occurs when one puts bacteria-contaminated fingers into one’s eyes, nose, or mouth. The bacteria multiply in the host and become abundant enough to cause symptoms of infection (disease). In Orange County, the most common flea-transmitted pathogen is the bacterium *Rickettsia felis*, causative agent of the disease called flea-borne typhus. Symptoms begin 1-2 weeks after infection and include headache, sustained fever above 102° F, chills, body aches, and rash away from the bite site. Advanced symptoms may include nervous system disorders and coma. Death from flea-borne typhus is rare, but permanent damage is common, such as hearing loss and muscle weakness.

When an opossum is dead or dying, its fleas leave the body and seek another host animal. If you are nearby, those fleas may jump onto you, bite, and increase your risk of infection and disease. If you find opossums (or other animals) acting strangely (weak, staggering, aggressive), dying, or dead for no apparent reason, keep back, do not approach, disturb, or handle them, and immediately notify the landowner (such as a park ranger) or the local animal control agency.

Since they walk through and feed on garbage, dead animals, and animal waste, opossums can carry bacteria (such as *Salmonella*) externally on their feet, fur, face, and tail.

Opossums are also commonly infested with parasitic gastrointestinal worms. These worms feed on the material swallowed by the opossum, then pass eggs or worms (entire or portions) in the opossum’s feces. Worms and worm eggs can be accidentally swallowed by people and pets, leading to infection.

If you suspect that you, your family, or your pets are infected with bacteria or worms, contact your health care provider for testing and treatment.

