

# Opossum

*Didelphis virginiana*

- The opossum is the only marsupial in Wisconsin.
- They have hairless, prehensile tails which they can use to grasp tree branches & are great climbers.
- One opossum may consume more than 5,000 ticks in a single summer season.
- Opossums have scored better than cats, rats, rabbits, and dogs in some scientific tests for their memory.

**Population:** You can find them across Wisconsin except for the Northeast part of the state. It is listed as “least concern” by the International Union for Conservation of Nature. Its population is listed as stable. Opossums can be hunted or trapped with a valid license & there are no season limitations, bag limits, size limits, or possession limits. However, they are not considered to be very valuable as food or for their fur.

**Habits:** One of the most peculiar habits of an opossum is “playing dead.” The animal has actually “passed out” due to the constriction of the blood vessels that supply blood to the brain. The release of compounds from the opossum’s adrenal glands due to the incoming threat causes this condition. Once the threat has passed, the blood flow returns, and the opossum will revive itself and continue its way, almost as if nothing happened. The opossum has no control over this reaction.

Some predators are driven by movement, and a prey animal that is already “dead” is not as appetizing as one that is alive and fresh. This involuntary constriction of blood vessels in the brain is an unconscious survival mechanism that has been fortuitously passed down the generations of opossum genetics, as it has helped them avoid predators and survive to reproduce.

Opossums are not typically aggressive, but they do have a defensive posture when threatened, and when they are not triggered to pass out. If cornered, they sit back, crouch down and open their mouth to show off as many of their 50 teeth as possible. This action is accompanied by screeches or growls that are let out to ward off an approaching predator.

Opossums are mostly nocturnal, and usually seen foraging for food after dark. They are also great climbers, thanks to their prehensile tails, and spend much of their time in trees.

**Diet:** Opossums are scavengers and opportunistic omnivores, which means they will eat whatever food is available to them. They will eat fruit, nuts, grass, birds, mice, worms, insects, snakes, as well as chickens. They have even been known to eat roadkill and raid garbage cans...and they happen to be very good at remembering where they have found food in the past.

## **Mating and Young:**

Opossums are also the only marsupial in North America, which means they have a pouch on their abdomen where they carry their young and feed them milk. In Wisconsin, they mate in March and are born after two weeks. Opossums have from three to 25 young that must climb three to four inches

upward into the pouch where they compete to attach to a nipple. About six or seven young survive and stay in the pouch until they are about the size of a mouse. Once they emerge from the pouch, the young hang onto the mother's back for a ride while she forages at night for food. They remain with their mother for three or four months.

Information from: <https://dnr.wisconsin.gov/topic/WildlifeHabitat/furbearers> & <https://www.livescience.com/56182-opossum-facts.html>