

Opossums, More Than Roadway Litter

I love opossum. Not to eat of course. Never had one, never want to. Until our big white dog decided she wouldn't stay in the dog yard any longer, opossums would visit us regularly. Many evenings, I'd be out on the porch when I'd hear this hissing or growling coming from a dark corner. It would always turn out to be an opossum come for the cat food I'd leave out. I won't say I enjoyed being startled this way, but I miss them coming around.

Pre big white dog, we'd have lots of stray cats turn up. I think a lot of them were feral because we could never catch most of them. For a while, I kept this big steel feeder of cat food in the woods. One day I went out to fill it and was greeted with a sleeping opossum. Nothing like having your food and sleeping in it too, I guess.

We keep chickens, so periodically we go through vanished eggs and/or chicken spells. Usually when it's just the eggs that go missing, it's an opossum or snake at work. A couple of years ago, in a humane trap out by the chicken house, we caught an opossum carrying babies. We relocated her near the Tennessee River, away from the road. I felt sorry because we took her away from a familiar, easy food source.

The time I looked out the kitchen window to see some funny animal walking straight down a tree in broad daylight was pretty neat too. Those weird looking tails may be used to grasp; a handy tool for walking down trees or hanging upside down.

Now about the only way I see opossums are dead, thanks to the ones hit by cars and the dog. I told my husband we really need to get that dog yard "motivated escapee" proofed, because she's keeping all the wildlife away. He thinks it's a good thing that we no longer meet up with opossums and raccoons on the porch. I don't know; in a weird way,

maybe I do miss being hissed at in the dark. Not that there's an unweird way to miss such a thing.



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Eat Poisonous Snakes

Opossums are adaptable and since European settlement of this country, they have pushed northward from Virginia into Canada. They eat everything from mushrooms, fruit, slugs, reptiles, amphibians, insects to carrion and small mammals such as shrews and moles. They've become familiar with garbage and the aforementioned pet food as a food source also. Basically, if it's not too big, they'll eat it.

Opossums have an immunity to snake venom, so they are able to eat rattlesnakes, water moccasins and copperheads. Even people who don't care for opossums can probably appreciate this. It seems few people have a tolerance for poison snakes and anything that lessens their numbers would probably be a positive to most people.

If you want to spot an opossum, the best time is dependent on the season. Most seasons, opossums are nocturnal and sleep in trees. But in cold weather they take to ground dens. If it is very cold, they probably will stay in their dens until the weather warms. Opossums do not hibernate, so they must use the fall months to fatten up.

Letters From Alabama by Philip Gosse tells of how most people in 1830's Alabama would not think of eating opossums until they fattened up. Gosse says that because opossums would eat Persimmons, the taste was much improved during this time. That's nice; I still don't intend to try one.

Opossums take some noxious things out of our environment. The flip side of being a scavenger means that the meat might be a little weird. Lots of folk recipes for opossum suggest a feeding out with corn for a week or two. Apparently, many people from the South considered opossum a primary food source in the early 1900's. It was then that some Tennessee transplants to California (where opossums were not native), took opossums to that state for raising as food. Some of these escaped animals helped populate central California.

Too Odd For The Grocery List

In addition to eating poisonous snakes, opossums walk up and down trees, as previously mentioned. They can swim. They are cute, really. You can see the cuteness if you will *only look*. At least you must surely concede that baby opossums are cute, once they get fur.

With their cute looks and unique skills, they just don't belong on a grocery list.

Opossums are strange animals. From their looks to the manner in which they breed, to gestation and so on, it seems that most everything about them is odd. Odd makes the world more interesting though.

If you ever happen upon opossums flopped over on their sides, you'll know that in about 13 days, some very tiny, hairless opossums will be making their way to the mother's pouch (marsupium). But only if the mother flopped to the right; if she didn't, then the entire effort was, well, you know... a flop.

Short Lived and Misunderstood

About six months after the first crawl to the pouch, opossums are on their own. The average life expectancy is about 1 - 2 years. Studies indicate that most opossums die due to being hit by vehicles, though they have plenty of predators. Scientists are unsure why opossums have such a short life expectancy. Even if not hit by a vehicle, opossums rarely live to the age of three.

They will spend much of their lives

moving about from den to den; often a different one each night. Of course, if you provide them with food they can sleep in, they probably won't go anywhere. Otherwise, from the den, they will spend the night going and coming on foraging trips. Den sites are dependent on if there is a nearby water source. Opossums may have a range of 150 - 300 acres.

It is easy to be prejudiced against opossums. They may seem scary if your first encounter with one involved growling and hissing. Many people find them ugly. Some misinformation exists about opossums as rabies carriers. Opossums actually are less likely to have rabies than most other animals because they have a high degree of resistance to the virus. Look at an opossum through the lens of curiosity and you will see a creature worthy of its existence and much too special to just be litter along the roadway.

- Anita Smith

Further Information

The Opossum: Its Amazing Story, William J Krause. Available in its entirety from Google books. Seemingly everything about the Virginia Opossum, including origin of "possum" and "opossum" terms.

The National Opossum Society, www.opossum.org

www.natureserve.org Search for Virginia opossum.

Animal Diversity Web animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu Search for Virginia opossum.



Isn't it splendid to think of all the things there are to find out about? It just makes me feel glad to be alive-it's such an interesting world. It wouldn't be half so interesting if we knew all about everything, would it? There'd be no scope for imagination then, would there?

- Anne of Green Gables, Lucy M. Montgomery

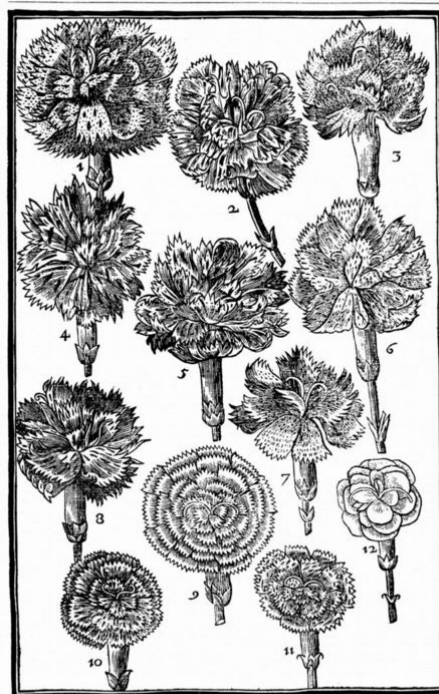
"Rachel, I never cease being amazed by your lack of tact."

Marilla

"I have no tact. I'm noted for that." Rachel ~

From *Road to Avonlea*

The Garden of pleasant Flowers.



1. *Hemaria Rodolphi* 2. *Arvensis* 3. *Prunella* 4. *Prunella* 5. *Caryophyllus* 6. *Caryophyllus* 7. *Caryophyllus* 8. *Caryophyllus* 9. *Caryophyllus* 10. *Caryophyllus* 11. *Caryophyllus* 12. *Caryophyllus*

2010 Meteor Showers and Viewing Tips
The next meteor shower is the Lyrids on April 21.

Name	Date of Peak	Moon
Quadrantids	night of January 3	Almost Full
Lyrids	nights of April 21/22	Sets around 3-4 a.m.
Eta Aquarids	night of May 5	Rises around 3 a.m.
Perseids	night of August 12	Sets around 10 p.m.
Orionids	night of October 21	Full
Leonids	night of November 17	Sets around 4 a.m.
Geminids	night of December 13	Sets around midnight

NOTES These are approximate times for the Lower 48 states; actual shower times can vary. Bright moonlight makes it difficult to see all but the brightest meteors. From Star Date Online, stardate.org