

Wildlife Rehab

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Virginia Opossum

The Virginia Opossum, also known as the North American opossum, is sometimes called the “land alligator” among wildlife rehabilitators. This is because the opossum has fifty teeth, more than any other mammal in North America.

The opossum is a fascinating wild animal, the only North American marsupial (pouched animal). One of the characteristics of the opossum that I find interesting is their ability to “play dead” which is actually a response to them being afraid. Their predator will assume the opossum is dead and the opossum will revive when the predator and danger have passed. This coined the phrase “playing ‘possum.”

At Elaine Connors Center for Wildlife, we have only cared for a handful of these interesting animals. One opossum we admitted was struck by a vehicle in Moultonboro and brought to us by Fish and Game. Examination showed the animal had a broken jaw. Surgery was necessary to wire the jaw closed for three weeks and the opossum was tube and syringe fed while it healed. The animal recovered fully and was released into a more suitable location than where it was hit on busy Route 25. The opossum shown in the photos came to us late this past summer, the victim of a trapping accident. The animal was caught in a humane trap but somehow managed to chew through the wire on the floor of the trap, impaling her jaw on the hardware cloth, lacerating her mouth and fracturing one tooth. This first year female opossum, was

examined by our veterinarian and placed on antibiotics. Although the tooth would never regenerate the infection resolved, the animal recovered and was released back to the wild.

Although the opossum is as elusive as another New Hampshire wild animal ... the bobcat, we have admitted six times as many bobcats as opossums in 23 years. We see very few opossums at our center but as the opossum expands its range northward, we know we will begin to see more admissions. Wildlife centers south of us in other New England states receive many opossums each year, most coming in as orphans when the mothers are found dead on the road. If we were to see an opossum on the road which had been hit by a car, we would wear gloves and check the pouch for babies! Birthing season starts in January to February and will last until early summer. Babies can number up to 20 but the litter is usually about 8-10, which is fortunate as the mother can only nurse 13. Other babies would starve.

The Virginia opossum is about the size of a housecat and is solitary and nocturnal. They measure anywhere between one and two feet, most being about 16 inches long. This doesn't include the tail which can add another eight to 18 inches. Most folks think the opossum is an unattractive animal, one to be shied away from, but this is probably due to the tail of the animal which is long, rat-like and hareless. The prehensile tail (which means used for grasping), is beneficial in carry-



ing objects, much like an elephant can use its trunk, and for hanging onto branches. The coat of the opossum is grayish-brown with fur that looks almost “frosted” and a pure white face with a long snout and those beady eyes found in nocturnal animals. The feet, which look more like hands, might be another reason the animal looks odd. So I can see why most people think the opossum wouldn't win any beauty contests.

In networking with other wildlife centers that have experience in raising neonate (newborn) opossums, it is an extremely difficult job to keep them alive to the point of releaseability. At birth they are the size of a bumblebee and their survival rate is almost

zero if they are hand-raised at that age. As with any mammal we receive, from squirrels to fawns, neonates are a challenge. After birth they use a special “thumb” located on their front legs to climb into the mother's pouch to nurse and continue developing. The opossum is omnivorous which means it will eat just about anything from insects to rodents as well as vegetables and fruits. They are also apt to be caught raiding the neighborhood garbage cans.

Because the tail is hareless, as are the ears, one would think the opossum to be a hibernator in our cold winters but this is not so. An opossum that was admitted to us in the winter of 2012 was the victim of extreme frostbite. We could tell that the animal had been frostbitten the winter before as well because of the scarring on the ears and tail and because of the missing toes. That may be the reason that continued frostbite the following winter was more than this animal could overcome. Despite our efforts to rehabilitate this opossum, the animal did not survive. The life expectancy of opossums in the wild is very short, usually not more than three years. I would expect the mortality in our northern states would be higher than in more temperate climates.

Join us for our next column in which we will share information about working with fisher, another New Hampshire forest animal which shares a somewhat undeserved reputation, a little like our friend the opossum.

The Elaine Connors Center for Wildlife is a non-profit wildlife rehabilitation center located in Madison, New Hampshire. The center is not funded to be a 24/7 emergency clinic and asks that people call ahead to bring injured and orphaned animals to the center during usual business hours. For more information about the center's work, contact rehab@myfairpoint.net or call (603) 367-WILD (9453).

