

Conservation Corner

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Recently while traveling around the state, we've encountered the usual roadkill scattered across Iowa's highways and byways. As we drove around the carcasses of deer, a coyote, raccoons, and opossums, I realized the opossum had yet to cross Conservation Corner. So to close out November, here are seven cool facts about opossums as presented by Ken Slade of the Iowa DNR.



That's Not My Name. While many Iowans omit the "o" and just say possum, opossums and possums are actually two different animals that live worlds apart. Over 100 species of opossums live throughout the Americas while 70 species of possums are native to Australia. These distant cousins eat less meat, have larger eyes and rounder faces, and are more closely related to kangaroos than to New World opossums.

Rabies Resistance. Unlike many common Iowa mammals, opossums are very unlikely to carry rabies as their body temperature is too low for the rabies virus to thrive.

Not Dead Yet. Opossums are also immune to some heavy-duty snake venoms. Rattlesnake or copperhead venom normally kills small mammals by reducing their blood's ability to clot. In opossum blood, however, small variations in the genetic code of the targeted proteins render the venom ineffective.

Tons of Teeth. A common behavior of opossums is to hiss and bare their teeth – all 50 of them! They are opportunistic omnivores and eat a variety of foods such as fruit, grass, nuts, worms, garbage, carrion, and, of course, unattended pet food. Did you know opossums have the highest number of teeth of any North American mammal?

Playing 'Possum. If worst comes to worst, a opossum will keel over and 'play dead' for several hours. Its mouth fall open, the tongue lolls out, breathing and heart rates drop dramatically, and the opossum will emit feces and a foul-smelling green liquid to smell as dead as possible. Brain activity, however, remains unaffected and the opossum is fully conscious.

Itty-Bitty Babies. As marsupials, opossum young are extremely small. Opossums average 2-3 litters per year with up to 50 dime-sized babies born per litter. Many will not survive long because the mother has only 13 teats in her pouch. On average, eight or nine joeys will climb out of their mother's pouch, onto her back, and survive to adulthood.

Getting Handsy. As you may have noticed from their tracks, opossums have hand-like back paws whose opposable thumbs help them climb and hang with ease. Their hairless, prehensile tail is used for support or balance.

In Pocahontas County, our most common species is the Virginia Opossum. In fact, the word "opossum" is borrowed from the Virginia Algonquian word *opassom* which translates as white beast or animal. In closing, I'd like to remind everyone that, even though they probably won't win any beauty contests, opossums are still one of Iowa's most unusual and beneficial animals. Opossums – another cool forager of nature that we can all appreciate this Thanksgiving Season.