



Critters in Our Midst: Possums (*Didelphis virginiana*)

by Carol Ellis

Not sure if the possum cared that I was photographing it. Maybe it couldn't see me or was just used to my presence?

Although I espouse the principles of planting for wildlife, I always seem surprised when it actually works. Wildlife need food, water, cover and a place to raise their young in order to live. Though there's little in this world I can control, there's an opportunity to make a difference when we plant for wildlife.

Though sometimes I may put a handful of sunflower seeds on the "seed table" for the resident cardinals or blue jays, I don't feed the critters. I do make sure my planting choices and practices are compatible with the needs of our native creatures. The best thing you can do to attract wildlife is plant native plants and they will come.

Critters can be pretty sneaky. Case in point: the gardener picked a ripe avocado and put it beside his lunchbox only to return to find it had disappeared. Hmmm? He assumed I had picked it up. I had not. A short while later we opened a storage box and there was movement and I screamed (of course), as I've never become accustomed to

actually seeing wildlife in my yard, and an enormous possum crawled out. It must've weighed 15 pounds! It had been the culprit that stole the avocado, and by



A common misconception about possums is that they hang by their tail. This possum is perched on a thick branch of a Wild Tamarind (*Lyceloma*) tree.

the looks of things may have consumed many more. The possum just lumbered off when it saw us. My thought is there's enough here for both of us, and I don't mind sharing some fruit or produce from my garden. One morning in January while surveying the

yard, looking for ripe fruit or vegetables, and clearing up any rotting fruit on the ground, I came across what appeared to be a dead possum. It was intact, no

appearance of foul play, although I am aware that some homeowners put out bait to kill the rats, so perhaps this critter was an unfortunate secondary victim, since their diet consists of mice and rats... perhaps it ate a poisoned rat. Opossums are nature's

"Sanitation Engineers". They also eat insects including cockroaches, crickets and beetles, and snails, as well as dead meat.

I picked it up, placed it in a grocery bag, and put it in the trash can. I didn't think any more of it. That is until I told the story to a naturalist who asked me if I



Sleeping or just sniffing out its next insect meal.

was sure it wasn't "Playing Possum"... you know, acting dead to dissuade a predator.

A possum will hiss, growl and flash a mouthful of 50 fierce-looking teeth in hopes of scaring a predator. If that doesn't work they will play dead, since the predator is less interested in dead meat. The naturalist said it's an involuntary comatose-like state induced by extreme



Side view of the possum shows one of its 50 teeth, more teeth than any other mammal in North America.

Possums... CONTINUED Photos by Carol Ellis

"We discovered a large possum enjoying some scraps outside the front door the other night. We used to have one who came so regularly every evening you could set your watch by him. I do believe that nothing in nature is ugly; however, I must also admit that there are some things that aren't exactly beautiful, and the possum is one them! This particular one was quite tame and would be quite still to be stroked. His coat was as silky and soft as goose down which made him beautiful to touch. Perhaps we lay too much store in believing beauty to be a visual thing, whereas in fact it should involve all the senses." (January 1980 - TORN (The Ocean Reef News))



Is this possum "Playing Possum" or is it dead?

fear, and somehow the opossum's body knows when the danger has passed. They could not control it, but would "come to" again. Nature's mystery! Putting it that way, I was not able to say I tested for temperature or life signs. It just looked dead.

That made my husband Ted remark, "When I die will you make sure you get a second opinion? To make sure I am dead?" He is one of a not-so-small

fraternity / sorority / "e-ternity" of people who have died (for Ted 8 minutes flat-line) and come back to life. People who have had this experience return with glowing stories of family reunions, or a sense of knowing about the glory of the afterlife.



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AN OPOSSUM RESCUE

One lucky orphaned possum was adopted by my webmaster Brittney Novalsky, who named it "Paris," and she raised it from the size of a tiny mouse until 3 years old. Brittney says Paris loved to cuddle, go on bike rides, and had a very special diet to keep her healthy. Brittney drove an hour round trip to get Paris quail eggs.




The opossum is North America's only marsupial. Infants stay inside the mother's pouch to nurse and develop, but if the mother dies while still nursing,



her offspring rarely survive. At 7 weeks old, the young leave the pouch but stick close to mom, still nursing and often riding atop her back



Though a possum's life span is a short 3-4 years, Brittney says the experience of knowing love from an opossum was worth it.