Living with Opossums

by Anne Muraski

There's a giant rat in my yard! In my hot tub! Looking in my window! Calls like these are common on The SPCA Wildlife Center "hotline." Invariably, the caller is misidentifying an opossum due to its pointed pink nose and long, hairless tail. Actually, opossums grow much larger than rats—13-21 inches not counting the tail—and have thinner hair and naked, leaflike ears.

Though their appearance may be alarming to some, this shy, nocturnal nomad poses little threat to home or property. Even nursing females with young change sites every 2-3 days, so if opossums take up residence in an undesirable place, you can usually just wait until they leave, then secure the area.

Since opossums are North America's only marsupial, even a nursing mother can be "on the move," carrying her young in her pouch like a kangaroo or koala. Opossums have no placenta; they are born after only 13 days gestation. They enter the world as honeybee-size embryos with developed paws that allow them to crawl to their mother's pouch where they attach to a nipple. After several months they leave the pouch, but still hang on mom's back for a few weeks. Never startle a opossum mother; in her panic to get away a baby may drop off her back and be unable to survive.

Opossums were introduced to California from the southeast United States in 1848 when a misguided entrepreneur thought he'd make a fortune selling opossum fur coats to gold rush miners (strange, but true). With the failure of this doomed venture, the thinly-haired opossum assimilated into the surrounding woodlands. As habitat dwindled, the opossum adapted to our urban environment and is now a common sight in our neighborhoods.

Opossums are the super omnivores of the animal kingdom and play an important role in keeping woodlands and urban areas clean. Their incredibly diverse diet includes roadkill, organic refuse, mice, rats, cockroaches and a wide variety of other insects. They prefer overripe, fallen fruit and eat garden slugs and snails.

### Opossum in the house

Occasionally an opossum—usually a juvenile—will enter a house through a sliding door or window, often lured by food. One woman was surprised when her two cats came through the pet door accompanied by a "friend" who joined the cats at their food bowl!

Close off other parts of the house, open windows and doors, and give the animal a clear path to exit. Shutting off lights may help calm the animal and make the escape route more obvious. You also can try putting a treat by the exit. Opossums are nearsighted, so give them time to leave. If this is a recurring problem, screen windows and keep doors closed at night.

### Opossum in the yard

A opossum meandering in the yard or scaling a tree at dusk is no cause for alarm. Like any wild animal, the opossum eventually will leave on its own unless you are providing food or shelter. If you put pet food outside or your garbage isn't sealed properly you may be feeding without knowing it. Feed pets inside or pick up dishes before dusk.

Opossums cannot jump, and will not break into your garbage like a raccoon or dog can, but they are good climbers—obposable thumbs on their hind feet plus a long tail (which, contrary to popular belief, they do not use for hanging up-side-down) provide excellent stability and balance. Occasionally, they can drop into an unsealed garbage can from above and be unable to jump out. Just lay the can it on its side and vacate the area until he leaves. To protect garbage from other animals, use heavy-duty cans with tight-fitting lids, or tie or weigh lids down. Keep cans in an anchored rack or tied to a fence so they can't be knocked over, or store trash inside until pick-up.

Opossums may take up residence temporarily under porches or houses, or in sheds or vacant buildings. Flaws such as unsealed foundations, missing vents, unscreened crawl spaces and unrepaird attic openings are usually the cause. Once you know the entry point, simply wait until the animal leaves to forage at night, then seal the entrance after making sure there are no boarders inside. A visual check is best, using a bright light or mirror if necessary. Try sprinkling a thin coating of flour near the entrance and check it frequently for tracks leading out.
Most wild animals like to sleep in places that are warm, dark and quiet, so deterrents can help ensure the animal doesn’t return before you seal entrances. The deterrents listed here should never be used during the March–August baby season as they could harm immobile offspring and prevent mom from returning. Employ these methods at night, after the animal has left the den to forage. Light the area with a flood lamp, play a radio or soak the area with a hose. Many animals won’t tolerate moth balls, ammonia-soaked rags (to maintain odor, use a rag to wick ammonia out of a bottle) or a liberal sprinkling of pepper in their sleeping quarters. Try using a few of these deterrents in different combinations.

Garden damage is more often caused by raccoons or deer than by opossums. Opossums rarely cat foliage and do not dig holes to forage since their paws are very soft. Opossums may actually be beneficial to gardens since they eat many garden pests. Yard problems from other animals are usually seasonal, depending on insect populations and food availability elsewhere. Water sources such as fountains and ponds are natural attractants, and may not be practical in drought areas. (See the Living With Deer and Living With Raccoons wildlife sheets for more information.)

**Note:** before you take action about any wild animal, ask yourself if action is truly necessary. If a raccoon is tearing up your shingles you need to block access to the roof immediately, but an old opossum sleeping in your brush pile may be doing no harm. As our lifestyles separate us further and further from the natural world, we tend to view wild animals as intruders instead of neighbors sharing habitat. Take a moment to weigh the inconvenience and practice tolerance toward wildlife.

**Opossums and domestic animals**

Opossums are not a threat to household pets except for very tiny newborns, which should not be left unattended. Opossums have a lower body temperature than other mammals, making them very resistant to diseases—rabies is extremely rare in opossums.

Opossums will raid open chicken coops for eggs and newly-hatched chicks. Outdoor animal enclosures should always be secured against predators.

When threatened, an opossum usually will freeze with mouth open to display his 50 teeth—more than any other North American land mammal. If that doesn’t work he may roll over and appear dead. The animal actually becomes unconscious when he “plays possum,” an effective defense mechanism since many predators will not eat dead animals. As with most opossum situations, if you leave them animal alone for a couple hours they will leave on their own.

These passive defenses don’t work very well with speeding cars or the other major threat to opossums: domestic dogs. To protect your pet and wildlife, never let your animal roam unsupervised. If your pet injures a wild animal, call The SPCA for help immediately.

**What not to do**

- Trapping or moving wildlife is illegal without a permit and simply does not solve the problem. There will always be another animal waiting to move in. Concentrate on removing the attraction, not the animal.

- Do not feed wild animals. We now know this practice hurts rather than helps wild animals—that’s why feeding is illegal in Monterey County. Providing an artificial food source causes overpopulation and disease. Many animals have specialized diets and can die from the wrong foods. Feeding causes animals to lose their natural fear of humans, making them easy targets. (See the *Eight Reasons Why Not To Feed Wildlife* sheet.)

- Never attempt direct contact with any wild animal. The lasting solution is simply to wait until the animal leaves, and then perform the structural repairs to prevent reentry. There is rarely, if ever, a reason to trap or confront a wild animal.

- Keep in mind that if you use a “pest control service” animals may end up being harmed, and offspring may be separated from their mother or left to perish. No quick fix will permanently solve a wildlife problem. Unless structural repairs are made and the attractant removed, you are just creating space for another animal. Call The SPCA first—they can provide advice free of charge.

- Do not use poisons. They can cause prolonged, painful death and secondary poisoning of raptors and other wild scavengers. Poisons kill indiscriminately—including neighborhood pets—and can remain in the food web for long periods of time. As always, the quick fix will not solve the problem; it will only open up space for another animal to move in.

**When to call The SPCA**

- If you cannot resolve your problem even after diligent use of the above tactics, or if you have a unique situation, call The SPCA Wildlife Center for humane advice: 373-2631 or 422-4721, ext. 227.

- If you encounter an opossum during the day it may be sick or injured. Call SPCA Wildlife Rescue at ext. 0 if you find any injured or orphaned animal.

*Note to grammar buffs: It is the sound, not the actual letter, which determines the *a* or *an* form of the indefinite article before a word: a university, an SPCA, a one-year term. Since popular usage in our area dictates a silent *o* in opossum, we use an opossum here.*