

LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

Humane, Effective Solutions to Human-Wildlife Conflicts

A Program of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals



Opossums - Living with this Amazing Marsupial

In cities, suburbs, and small towns across Massachusetts, people are noticing a change in their neighborhoods. Some think it's good. Some think it's bad. But everybody seems to be talking about it: more wild animals are making their homes in and around people's yards and houses, in parks and playgrounds, in business developments, even right on Main Street.

Opossums are the only marsupial (the female carries the young in a pouch) found north of Mexico. They are highly adaptable and are able to live wherever water, food, and shelter exist. They are shy animals that seldom cause problems for humans. On the rare occasions when there are conflicts with opossums, we should humanely encourage these animals to find shelter and/or food somewhere else.

General Information

The opossum is a medium-sized mammal, about the size of a house cat, with grey to black fur, a pink nose, naked ears, opposable thumbs on the hind feet, and an almost hairless prehensile tail (able to grasp, hold or wrap around). They are solitary, slow moving animals that are most active at night, when they wander randomly in search of food.

Opossums are omnivorous and are beneficial to humans because they consume undesirable insects, snails, and slugs.

Although they are excellent climbers and have been known to live in tree cavities, they prefer to den on the ground in old woodchuck burrows, brush/wood piles, or spaces under decks or patios - they do not dig burrows.

Opossums are usually shy and harmless animals, with two main defense mechanisms. If an opossum is frightened and unable to flee, it may display its teeth and hiss. Although this behavior might appear fierce, it is usually just a warning. If an opossum feels it is in danger, it might "play possum" and have the appearance of being dead. When the opossum feels that it is no longer in danger, it will revive itself and move on.

The life span of opossums is very short - a 4 year old wild opossum is a rarity. The average female probably lives through 1 breeding season in which time she may raise 2 litters of approximately 12 young. The large litters help accommodate for the high mortality rate opossums face.

Once born, the tiny, blind, hairless young instinctively crawl upward into the mother's pouch where they will nurse for almost 2 months. They are fully independent of their mother at approximately 3 months.

Possible Conflicts and Solutions

Conflicts with opossums are minimal but usually concern an opossum making a den under a deck or patio. When this occurs, the eviction strategy is relatively simple since opossums carry their young on their backs, and there is far less chance of helpless young being left behind.

If an opossum has taken up residence under your home, the first step is to encourage it to leave. This can easily be accomplished with mild harassment techniques such as placing leaves or straw in the entranceway, or placing items with a strong human scent (dirty socks or old sneakers) near, not blocking, the entrance to the den.

Exclusion using a one-way door is also easy and effective. Wait until approximately 2 hours after dark when the opossum should be out foraging, and after confirming the opossum is out of the den, loosely close the opening with netting, straw, a one-way door or another material. This way an animal inside can easily push its way out but an animal on the outside will not be

If an opossum has entered your house or a building, these slow-moving animals can be guided out with as little as a broom to gently nudge them along to an open door.

If an opossum is seen in your yard or neighborhood, the best thing to do is to be patient since they will most likely move on within a short time without the need for human intervention.

While it is not common for opossums to raid garbage cans or gardens, you should discourage visits by opossums or other urban wildlife by securing trash containers with tight-fitting lids, and picking up food bowls if your pets have been fed outdoors.

THE **LIVING WITH WILDLIFE** MISSION

The MSPCA Living With Wildlife program aims to protect wild species, now and in the future. The program promotes peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife in urban, suburban, and rural Massachusetts communities by helping to resolve human-animal conflicts in a humane, nonlethal, long-term and cost-effective manner.

Public Health Concerns

Opossums are susceptible to a variety of diseases but their role in transmitting these to humans is uncertain. Similar to all warm-blooded animals, rabies occurs in opossums but it is very rare.

For more information about humanely solving human-wildlife conflicts or about the MSPCA's Living with Wildlife program, call 617-524-5632, visit www.LivingWithWildlife.org or e-mail livingwithwildlife@mspca.org.