



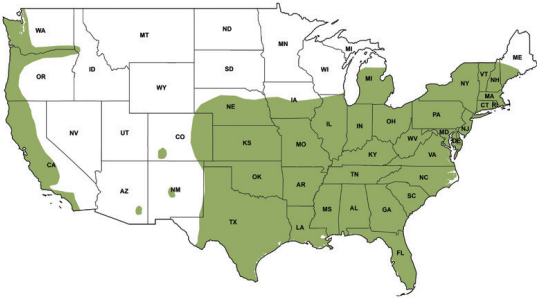
Opossum

Didelphis virginiana



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RANGE: across Louisiana, most of Eastern U.S., south into Mexico



Diet, Habitat & Behavior

Opossums eat anything, including insects, fruits, berries, small mammals, birds, eggs and carrion. They also raid garbage cans. Opossums have an ability to feign death, called "playing possum." This condition is induced by fear and stress. They appear unconscious, the mouth opens slightly, drooling occurs, the entire body becomes limp, and the feet clutch together. Opossums are clean animals and groom regularly. They do not hibernate. They have a keen sense of smell. Opossums live in wooded areas, with water close by preferred. They will also live in any timbered area, agricultural area, marshes and residential neighborhoods. They den in a burrow, hollow tree or a log.

Anatomy

Opossums are the size of a domestic house cat, with shorter legs and a heavier body. Females have an external fur-lined abdominal pouch for carrying young. Adults average about 4 pounds. They have 50 teeth, more than any other Louisiana land mammal. Opossums are prey to dogs and horned owls. They are relatively free of parasites, but can be afflicted by tapeworms and flatworms.

Reproduction

Opossums mate in December and January, again in April, and sometime mid-summer. After 12-13 days, 15 or more premature embryos leave the womb and crawl to the pouch. Average litter size in Louisiana is seven. The young are extremely tiny, blind and incomplete in development. It takes 22-24 newborns to equal the weight of a penny. They are weaned in 75-80 days. As they grow, they cling to the mother's fur and ride on her back.



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