



The Virginia or common opossum (*Didelphis marsupialis*) is a shy marsupial that originated in the Eastern and Southern United States. It's now found throughout California. Opossums are reported to have arrived on the West Coast in San Jose around 1910. The first opossums may have been brought here by travelers, who sometimes used them for food. With a little help from humans, the opossum has spread to almost all habitats for which it is adapted, from the Coast Range to the foothills of the Sierra-Nevada and throughout the Central Valley.

The opossum is the only mammal in North America with a pouch for rearing its young. It is distantly related to the kangaroo and other marsupials in both Australia and New Zealand. Up to eighteen developing young are born after only twelve days of gestation. After birth, the blind babies make their way up through their mother's abdominal hair and into her pouch, following a path she's licked for them. There, they attach them-

selves to one of her 13 to 17 teats. Some of the newborn opossums are unable to locate an available teat and perish. Those that do attach themselves remain there for about eight weeks until they're developed enough to leave the pouch for short periods of time. It's not unusual for only six to ten young to survive and leave their mother at four months to fend for themselves.

The adult opossum is about the size of a large house cat and is often described as being slow and stupid. In fact, when compared to other animals it does have a small brain in relationship to its body size. Experts offer several reasons for its survival and successful adaptation: it tends to avoid conflicts with other animals; it will eat anything, animal or vegetable, dead or alive; and it produces lots of young, often two litters a year.

The opossum hunts for its food during the night, except in the winter when it will switch to hunting in the daytime. In this way it can use the sun to help warm itself up. Most of



its food consists of insects, including many garden pests, mice, bird eggs, fruit, nuts, berries, carrion, and even garbage. Opossums find plenty to eat in agricultural areas, as well as in cities where many people maintain vegetable gardens and fruit trees.



### In Your Yard

It's not unusual to find opossums around a home in the Bay Area, even away from nearby open woodlands and grasslands. However, opossums present no real danger to people.



Because of their shy, retiring nature they go out of their way to avoid conflict. They will bite, but only if handled. The opossum is adaptable and quick to take advantage of a woodpile, shed, deck, accessible basement, or even the attic in a home for a temporary or seasonal shelter. What may be attracting an opossum to your yard is the presence of vegetables in your garden or fallen fruit on the ground. Another strong attractant for the scavenging opossum is food left outside for



pets. You may not only be feeding your pet by leaving food out all the time, but you may also be feeding opossums, raccoons, skunks, and other wild animals.

Many Bay Area residents have come to look forward to the harmless comings and goings of our local wildlife. To these nature enthusiasts, the natural behavior of wild animals is something special to observe and treasure.



### What You Can Do if an Opossum is Under Your House or in Your Attic

The first thing to do is wait. Wait a few days to determine if the presence of the opossum is permanent or temporary. It's not uncommon for an opossum to live for a short time around an area that has fruit on the ground. After the food is gone the opossum will move on.

The more attractive a location, the greater the likelihood that wild animals will visit. Two of the most inviting factors are food and



water. To reduce the likelihood that opossums will visit your yard or buildings, don't leave your pet's food outside overnight. Also, if you have any fruit trees that are dropping fruit, be sure to clean up the fallen fruit immediately.

To reduce the opportunities for opossums to enter your basement or crawl spaces, be sure that all access ways and airways are securely sealed. Before sealing any openings, however, be sure that no animals are under the house or in the attic. They may become entrapped. If an opossum has already taken up residence in your basement or under your deck, you can discourage its continued use of this space by putting mothballs in the area. Once you're sure it's gone, secure the opening that led under the house or deck.

If an opossum must be removed because you, your pets, or the opossum is in danger, then you'll need to contact an animal control agency. It's against state law for private home owners to transport and relocate California wildlife. Most agencies in the Bay Area will require you to trap the animal first before they'll come to remove it. Some agencies may

supply the trap. You must also keep in mind that due to California Fish and Game regulations, they cannot legally relocate an opossum. The relocation of a wild animal into an already occupied habitat can increase the pressure for available food and hiding places.



### Sharing the World Together

Please remember that most wild animals that visit our yards are just following their instinct for survival. As rational beings, we can learn to understand and live with our wild neighbors.

*They've learned to live with us. Can we not learn to live with them?*



Text by Paul Ferreira  
Illustration by Dyami Bol  
Photos courtesy of the Opossum Society of the United States.  
For more information about opossums please contact [www.opossumsocietyus.org](http://www.opossumsocietyus.org)

## Visitor Centers & Recreation Services

**ARDENWOOD HISTORIC FARM**  
Fremont 510-796-0199, [awvisit@ebparks.org](mailto:awvisit@ebparks.org)

**BLACK DIAMOND MINES**  
Antioch 925-757-2620, [bdvisit@ebparks.org](mailto:bdvisit@ebparks.org)

**COYOTE HILLS REGIONAL PARK**  
Fremont 510-795-9385, [chvisit@ebparks.org](mailto:chvisit@ebparks.org)

**CRAB COVE at CROWN BEACH**  
Alameda 510-521-6887, [ccove@ebparks.org](mailto:ccove@ebparks.org)

**SUNOL REGIONAL WILDERNESS**  
Sunol 925-862-2601, [svisit@ebparks.org](mailto:svisit@ebparks.org)

**TILDEN NATURE AREA/EEC and LITTLE FARM**  
Berkeley 510-525-2233, [tnarea@ebparks.org](mailto:tnarea@ebparks.org)

**AQUATICS UNIT**  
510-690-6620, [dmccormick@ebparks.org](mailto:dmccormick@ebparks.org)

**REGIONAL PARKS BOTANIC GARDEN**  
c/o Tilden Regional Park, Berkeley  
510-841-8732  
[bgarden@ebparks.org](mailto:bgarden@ebparks.org), [www.nativeplants.org](http://www.nativeplants.org)

**OUTDOOR RECREATION UNIT**  
District-wide programs 510-544-2512  
[recreation@ebparks.org](mailto:recreation@ebparks.org)

This brochure is provided as a public service of the Interpretive and Recreation Services Department of the East Bay Regional Park District.



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# Opossums



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