

Virginia opossum *Didelphis virginiana*

Kingdom: Animalia

Division/Phylum: Chordata

Class: Mammalia

Order: Didelphimorphia

Family: Didelphidae

ILLINOIS STATUS common, native

FEATURES

An adult Virginia opossum has a head-body length of between 15 and 24 inches while the tail may be nine to 20 inches long. It has a pouch for the immature offspring to develop in after they are born. An opossum has long, coarse, gray hair, white facial hair and a long, pointed pink nose. There is dark hair near the legs. The ears are hairless. The round, hairless, prehensile tail helps with balance and climbing. An opposable toe on the hind foot also helps with climbing and grasping.

BEHAVIORS

The Virginia opossum may be found statewide in Illinois. This mammal lives in woodlands, stream corridors, brushy areas and urban areas. The opossum is usually nocturnal. It is an omnivore that eats vegetation (fruit, grain and seeds), animals (insects, birds, eggs, reptiles and worms) and scavenged material (garbage, road kills). A threatened opossum will play dead, hiss or bare its teeth. The opossum has more teeth than any other land mammal. This shy and secretive mammal is a good climber and swimmer. The opossum breeds in late January and February, with most adults breeding a second time in May. The average litter size is eight. Young are born about two weeks after the eggs are fertilized and are very immature. The average weight for a newborn opossum is 0.0056 ounce. The young opossums move to the mother's pouch and attach to a nipple to complete development. They leave the pouch about two to three months later.

HABITATS

Aquatic Habitats

bottomland forests; marshes; peatlands; swamps; wet prairies and fens

Woodland Habitats

bottomland forests; coniferous forests; southern Illinois lowlands; upland deciduous forests

Prairie and Edge Habitats

black soil prairie; dolomite prairie; edge; gravel prairie; hill prairie; sand prairie; shrub prairie

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