

Old One Eye

Most wildlife rehabilitation involves raising orphans, a job made easier by the eagerness with which hungry, frightened young creatures' accept any surrogate. Injured adults are different. Captivity induces so much stress that many wild adults injure themselves further trying to escape. When I got the call about an opossum that had been hit by a car, I feared she would be such a patient.

The possum was a sorry sight—dirty, disheveled, and with dried blood on her nose. Once she had a chance to become accustomed to her new surroundings I gave her a physical exam. I found bruising and scrapes on one side, and a badly damaged eye, but no broken bones. She tolerated the prodding with remarkable equanimity; she did not try to wriggle away, growl hiss or bite. She lapped some nourishment, pain medication and antibiotic from a large syringe, and allowed me to wash her eye.

The tips of her ears and tail had been lost to frostbite, proving that she had survived at least one Vermont winter. When she yawned, I could see that her teeth were rounded from wear. She was an old opossum! I would think it remarkable for an opossum to live long enough to become aged, given the myriad hazards they face, except that opossums often begin to age at a mere two years old and seldom live beyond three and a half years even in coddled captivity. One expects tiny, active animals with a high metabolic rate to burn through life quickly; the hyperactive short-tailed shrew, for example, lives a maximum of 2.5 years, and has a metabolic rate ten times faster than opossums. Why wouldn't opossums live as long as raccoons? These masked omnivores have a metabolic rate about twice as fast as opossums,' yet can live for twenty years in captivity.

Twice each day I treated Old One Eye, changed her bedding, gave her food and water and, and each day her condition improved. In a week she was ready to go into an outdoor enclosure to develop strength. It was clear that her damaged eye would be lost, but opossums do most of their navigating with their noses and whiskers, so a one-eyed opossum has only a slight handicap. Two weeks after her mishap, the old girl was ready for liberty.

Lydia, the woman who rescued the possum from the roadside, suggested that her own home would be a good release site since it was near where the opossum was found, yet away from the traffic of Route 5. When the day

arrived, I drove up a long, winding, quiet dirt road and found Lydia's farmhouse surrounded by wonderful habitat. I carried Old One Eye's crate to the edge of a wetland thicket and opened the door. How her whiskers twitched as she inhaled the aromas of the earth! She strode to a small patch of muddy open ground, took a bite of the holy stuff, chewed a few times, and then spit it out again, the opossum equivalent of kissing the home soil, perhaps? She then wandered back up to where I was sitting and to my surprise climbed up into my lap. After gazing at her new surroundings, she slipped back down and wandered off into the thicket and into the life of a proper opossum.

Meanwhile, back at the ranch, the eighteen orphan opossums I have been raising have continued my opossum education. I reported in my last column that I communicated with young opossums by imitating the call that they make to each other, the group-cohesion-sneeze-sound—chh! chh! I recently read, however, that the sound the mother opossums' make to gather their brood is a different one—the lip-smacking noise I hear male possums produce when making overtures to females. When a possum mother calls, she is letting the kids know that she is ready to move along, and if they plan to come they had better jump aboard. Once they are too big to fit in her pouch, they ride clinging to her fur. If they miss the summons or fail to hang on they will be left behind.

I found that when I made the sneezy noise, the possums continued with their activities. If I made one or two



of the soft lip smacking noises, though, I created an opossum stampede. One of the first times I tried this I was bringing the little pups their dinner. I was fresh from the shower, and my hair hung around me in long, dripping tendrils. As soon as I made the noise, an army of little possums was climbing up my hair, hand over fist, on an earnest mission for the summit. Yes, it pulled like the dickens, but I couldn't stop laughing long enough to cuss at them. They climbed back on faster than I could detach them. I still can't explain how I managed to get out of the enclosure with no possums on board, and with at least half of my hair still attached.

The possum joeys weigh about a half-pound each now. They sleep in fleece slings suspended from a horizontal pole. It is not unusual to find all eighteen of them piled into one small hammock, the great basketball-sized bulge hangs lower each day. In a few weeks they will be ready to begin their lives as full-fledged wild possums.

I am grateful to all of my wildlife charges for allowing me to enter their nations in some small way, to answer questions and raise new ones. I now know how to summon a herd of baby possums, but I may always wonder: Did Old One Eye climb into my lap to test the air from a different level, or was she seeking a moment of familiar contact before heading out into a new place—an opossum good-bye?