

The Awesome in Possum



Here is what many people know of the Virginia opossum: the pale shape scurrying awkwardly through the dark towing a pale rat-tail; the hissing alligator maw of a startled opossum; the numerous lifeless lumps of fur along roadways. These people wonder at my inordinate fondness for possums. Here is what I know: when I carry Alexandria and Samuel Gompers down to the office in their carrier and plop them on the couch, they wake up and yawn and sniff the air hopefully. I feed them some grapes, which they chew thoroughly with their Muppet mouths, eventually spitting out the skins. They will then sometimes ramble about the office a bit to see if any interesting smells have materialized overnight before crawling back into their den to sleep for the rest of the day. I peek in often since they sprawl in amusing postures, and besides, they like to have their bellies rubbed. At almost a year old, Alexandria is beautiful, the sooty fur around her eyes set off by her white plush coat. Her brother is a great bull possum. His head and neck are broader than his sister's and the sides of his mouth tend to droop from all of the salivating and lip-smacking that are an important part of male possum scent-marking and courtship. Both are good-natured, docile creatures who, like all possums, seem designed for life on a different sort of planet, one on which life happens slowly, where temperatures are warm and predators few. Still, somehow opossums not only survive on our planet but they have been slowly expanding their range.

They succeed by reproducing prodigiously. A female opossum can have up to thirteen joeys at a time (though they seldom produce that many), and typically raise two litters a year. They also succeed by eating almost anything, the smellier the better.

Samuel Gompers, Alexandria, and the President were tiny and pink and smelled of carrion when they were delivered to my custody after a caring motorist removed them from the corpse of their road-killed mother. Their weights straddled the 20-gram mark, below which chances of successfully raising possums are considered near nil,

indeed a fourth sibling did not make it through the first week. The other three, however, transformed from decidedly homely into cute little fluffy joeys. Like all proper baby possums, they joined me, their surrogate mother, on some of my daily rounds, tucked into a modified satchel—the porta-possum. By then they were already prodigious grippers and would ride along clinging to the inside of the satchel with their heads poking over the top to survey the passing world.



The possums came with me to beaver camp, and began their first independent sorties in a canopy tent there. Opossum families make a sneezing noise to keep track of each other, and I did my best to imitate this sound. The three wanderers always kept up a chorus of sneezes and stayed within range of mine.

Because speed and agility are not hallmarks of the species, I did not notice until too late that Samuel Gompers did not walk normally. Opossums are particularly susceptible to a type of bone disorder that results in short, thick leg bones. Alexandria also had the condition, but to a lesser degree. I decided to keep them over the winter to see if the condition would improve. Now, as they approach their first birthday, it seems their destiny will be as ambassadors—to grow old sharing the wonders of possums with BEEC campers and school children.

And wonders there are—the Virginia opossum has many distinctions. It is, of course, the only marsupial in the United States. A mother opossum gives birth to embryonic infants after a thirteen-day gestation period. About the size of a kidney bean, but with well-developed

front legs, the newborns drag themselves up the short path to their mother's pouch. There they play a life-or-death game of musical nipples. A female opossum is equipped with thirteen nipples, and may give birth to twenty joeys. The newborns must latch onto a nipple in order to survive. Those that fail are out of the game. The joeys will remain attached to their nipple for about sixty days, and are fully weaned a month later.

Opossums also have prehensile tails, play dead when threatened, are resistant to rabies, and are immune to rattlesnake venom. Here is the reason you will want as many opossums in your neighborhood as possible—opossums may be your best allies in reducing the incidence of Lyme disease. Research published in *Nature* (Dec. 2010), compares white-footed mice and opossums as Lyme disease vectors. The researchers found that mice groomed off and ate 1,021 deer ticks per hectare, but almost as many ticks, 906, fed on the mice and became infected with the Lyme spirochetes. Virginia opossums, well equipped to pluck off ticks with their iron-grip paws, attracted and ate 5,487 ticks per hectare. Of the 199 ticks that bit a possum and got away, only five carried the Lyme spirochete.

I now have eighteen little joeys— that's right, eighteen, and you should see the pile of them, snoozing away in their nest, fists clenched, twitching as they dream their possum dreams. They represent two litters, one of thirteen and one of five, all survivors of automobile encounters. They show great potential as decorative-but-shy tick magnets and sanitation workers. They are about eleven weeks old now, and should be ready to release by mid-summer. Want a possum or two for your backyard? I am looking for locations that have little traffic, few predators (no dogs), good cover for hiding, and proximity to water. If you think your neighborhood qualifies, let me know.

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