



Virginia Opossums

(Didelphis virginiana)

Understanding the habits and habitats of wildlife, and taking appropriate measures to prevent unwanted encounters, will help everyone to continue to enjoy the wonderful wild resources that still exist in New Jersey.

Coexisting with Opossums

Virginia opossums, commonly called opossums, are the only marsupial on this continent. Generally nocturnal, opossums spend the day in hollow tree trunks, rock crevices, under brush piles, or in burrows.

Opossums inhabit forested or brushy habitats and have adapted well to living close to people in urban and suburban environments.

Although they can climb and are good swimmers, opossums prefer to live on the ground where they amble about slowly. Because of this, they are frequently struck by cars when crossing the street.

Opossums are omnivores. They eat both plant and animal foods and scavenge carrion and garbage. They are solitary animals who prefer to avoid each other except during breeding season in late winter.

Getting to Know Opossums

Although opossums sometimes cause damage by overturning garbage, eating fruit or vegetables from the garden, and occasionally getting into a chicken house, they can easily be discouraged through habitat modification. Here are some ideas:

- **Secure trash** – Opossums are attracted to food scraps in garbage and compost piles. Dispose of trash in a metal can. Make sure the lid fits tightly and secure it with rope or chain. Do not put food in compost piles; bury food waste in an underground composter or use a lidded worm box instead.
- **Avoid leaving pet food outdoors** – If you cannot avoid feeding dogs or cats outdoors, pick up food and water bowls, as well as leftovers and spilled food, as soon as your pets have finished eating.
- **Lock pet doors at night** – and do not leave pet food near the opening.

About Mercer County Wildlife Center

The Mercer County Wildlife Center is a state and federally licensed facility that cares for injured, ill and displaced wildlife. The Center provides these animals with the medical treatment and a temporary refuge before releasing them back into an appropriate wild habitat.

For more information regarding the work we do and the animals who share our environment, including a series of printable brochures that provide tips for coexisting peacefully with those animals, visit us online at:

www.mercercounty.org/departments/mercercounty-park-commission/wildlife-center

For information on protecting bee hives and livestock, contact the Division of Fish and Wildlife Wildlife Control Unit at (908) 735-8793.



- **Eliminate den sites** – Opossums look for convenient den sites, which in developed areas include rock, wood, and brush piles, as well as open spaces under porches, houses, and sheds. Before sealing possible den sites and entries, check first to make sure no animals are present, especially when there might be young opossums that are old enough to be mobile off their mother's back but are not yet independent. To determine whether there are animals, cover openings near the ground with loose soil and watch to see if an opossum digs out. If you suspect activity in a crawl space or opening in a wall, begin exclusion by sealing all available entries. Leave one hole open and fit it with a one-way door, similar to a cat door, with a hinged flap so that the opossums can escape but not reenter. Leave in place for several days, and continue to watch for activity. When you are certain the animals are gone, close all openings with boards or metal screening, making sure that the carrier extends 8-10" underground. Remove other potential cover such as debris piles and low-growing vegetation.

If you keep chickens, enclose the birds at night – Secure the coop with well-fitting doors and a solid, concrete floor. Surround the coop with fencing that extends 6-8" underground to prevent opossums from digging into the chicken yard.



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Dan Benson, *County Executive*

The Mercer County Wildlife Center is owned by Mercer County and operated by the Mercer County Park Commission with the support and assistance of Wildlife Center Friends.

Wildlife Center Friends is a 501(C)(3) non-profit organization formed to support the activities of the Mercer County Wildlife Center. • www.wildlifecenterfriends.org