

# Rumford man investigated for cutting off opossum's tail

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RUMFORD — An elderly opossum is recovering at an Auburn wildlife rescue facility after a man cut off the animal's tail and left him for dead last week.

The opossum is popular among some residents in the Rumford neighborhood he has roamed for at least a couple of years. One family there named him Percy.

The Maine Warden Service has investigated the man, who lives in the neighborhood, and forwarded its report to the Oxford County District Attorney's Office for possible criminal charges. The man told the investigating warden that the opossum attacked him.

Those who know Percy say he is docile and has never been aggressive to people in the neighborhood, even when he was scared or in pain. They doubt the man's story.

"There is no way Percy Opossum attacked," said Terri Dunham, who helped capture the animal and brought him to Misfits Rehab at 850 Garfield Road in Auburn.

According to the Warden Service, the incident happened last week. The man told the investigator that he was in the yard of a property he had recently sold when he heard a hissing sound and looked down to see the opossum biting his boot.

The man told the warden he then stepped on the animal. Believing the opossum was dead, the man picked him up, cut off his tail and left.

"Opossums do play dead as a defense tactic, so it is likely he believed it was dead," said Emily MacCabe, director of information and education at the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries and Wildlife.

After the man returned home, he decided to revisit the animal in hopes of collecting its skull or teeth, MacCabe said. When he went back, he saw the opossum in a nearby alley and realized the animal was still alive.

The man called the Warden Service on June 21 to report the encounter. A warden met with the man, then went to the area where he said he'd killed the animal.



Wildlife Rehabilitator Jennifer Marchigiani lets Percy get some fresh air outside Misfits Rehab in Auburn where he was recovering Thursday afternoon.  
*Russ Dillingham/Sun Journal*

“Obviously, the opossum wasn’t there,” MacCabe said.

The man was told to call a warden if he saw the animal again.

MacCabe did not name the man and the Sun Journal was unable to confirm his identity Thursday. A Facebook message sent to the man believed to be the one involved was not returned.

Shortly after the man spoke to the warden, Dunham contacted the Warden Service to report that she had found Percy injured.

Dunham and her family had been looking out for Percy for the past couple of years. She most often saw him at her porch, where she fed stray cats.

“I used to have cat food and stuff along my porch,” she said. “All the cats would eat, then all the opossums would come eat. Sometimes the opossums and the cats were all out there eating together. We had quite a few and then Percy seemed to keep coming back and coming back as the others left.”

By this past winter, Percy was the only visiting opossum. One day, he showed up with severe frostbite to his ears, toes and tail.

Dunham took Percy to Misfits Rehab in Auburn, where Jennifer Marchigiani, a wildlife rehabilitator, took over his care. Percy recovered, but the frostbite was so serious that a veterinarian had to amputate about a quarter of his tail.

In the wild, opossums need their tails to help stabilize them as they climb trees, keep their balance along branches and gather food. At the time, Percy had enough tail left to return to the wild. He was released back into his home territory in early spring.

“He disappeared, but everybody in the neighborhood knew it was our opossum because of his tail. I posted on Facebook, ‘Let me know if anybody’s seen Percy,’” Dunham said. “And my friends would say, ‘Oh, Percy was just over at my house. I could tell he was yours because of the tail.’”

About six weeks later, Percy returned to Dunham’s house, this time missing fur from mange.



Wildlife Rehabilitator Jennifer Marchigiani lets Percy get some fresh air outside Misfits Rehab in Auburn where he is recovering Thursday afternoon. *Russ Dillingham/Sun Journal*

“It’s kind of like he knew ... they’ll help me,” Dunham said.

She took Percy back to Misfits Rehab, where he was treated for mange. He was returned home a couple of weeks ago.

“He used to stay in my shed a lot, but he took off. He was probably like, ‘I’m not staying with them! They keep putting me in a cage and taking me to that lady’s house,’” Dunham said.

So when a friend told Dunham a couple of days ago that she’d spotted Percy in the area, Dunham went over to see him. That’s when the friend told Dunham that Percy’s tail was completely gone and that a neighbor had boasted about cutting it off.

Dunham said her friend told her that the man “paraded up and down the street with the tail bragging about it, ‘Oh, an opossum attacked me so I cut its tail off.’”

Dunham and her adult daughter found Percy hiding in the area. Dunham’s daughter eventually captured the opossum by crawling under a trailer after him.

“He didn’t try to attack my daughter,” Dunham said. “My daughter had him right close to her chest, holding him, dragging herself along the bottom of this small trailer. There was just enough space for her to get in there and out.”

The opossum was brought back to Misfits Rehab, where he is being treated with pain medication and antibiotics.

Marchigiani, the wildlife rehabilitator, said opossums are generally not aggressive and Percy in particular has gotten used to being around humans and handled. When angry or upset, she said, he tends to just growl.

“He’s definitely not an attack opossum,” she said.

However, she said, Percy is a wild animal and wild animals can bite.



Terri Dunham found Percy the opossum hiding days after his tail was cut off by a man in her Rumford neighborhood. *Photo courtesy Terri Dunham*



*Photo courtesy Misfits Rehab*

“My theory is, if he indeed did bite this guy’s sneaker as he claims, he was probably waving his foot in front of (the opossum’s) face, had him trapped in a corner kind of thing where it was all he had to try to defend himself,” she said.

Marchigiani estimated Percy is 2 to 3 years old. Opossums typically live up to four years.

Because he no longer has a tail, Percy can never be returned to the wild. Marchigiani plans to keep him.

“He’s not going to have to worry about foraging and gathering materials. He’s going to have plenty of fleece blankets and sheets and pillows. He’ll have the lap of luxury now,” she said.

“Especially since we already know he’s a fairly advanced, senior opossum. Who knows how much longer he has, so we’ll make the best of what he has left.”

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