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The O-mazing Opossum *Didelphis virginiana*...Virginia opossum...possum. Whatever you call it, it's one of the most unique animals waddling around southeastern Ontario. Native to parts of the U.S., Mexico and Central America, the opossum has slowly crept north, following the availability of agriculture crops for food. Accidental and intentional releases probably added to its presence in Ontario, as well as a warming climate trend that encourages northward rambling. The opossum has long, coarse, grayish-white fur across the body, a white face and black-brown legs. It has small, dark eyes, a pointy snout and dark, hairless ears. Its long tail is naked and scaly – unattractive, but very useful! It's partially prehensile, and can wrap around a branch to help secure the opossum's body. A young, lighter-weight opossum can hang upside down from its tail. The appendage can even be used to clutch and carry bedding material to a den. An opposable "thumb" on each back foot also helps the opossum grasp branches and climb.

This opportunistic omnivore doesn't have a home range. It wanders about forested lowlands eating insects, worms, eggs, carrion, fruits, nuts and more. It adapts well to living among us, especially where it finds pet food, bird seed, unsecured trash cans and crops. While this can cause conflicts, we might pardon the opossum, as it is helping to slow the spread of Lyme disease. It kills 90% of the ticks it encounters, and a single opossum can eat 5,000 ticks in one season. It ambles along on its nocturnal rounds, with activity peaking between 11:00 pm – 2:00 am. It doesn't hibernate, but when the temperature plummets, it may spend several days under shelter. Simply not well adapted to northern winters, it commonly suffers frostbite on its exposed ears, tail and paws. Biologists often use frostbite damage as a way to determine an opossum's age. This intolerance for cold and a scarcity of food during the winter account for its low population density in our region.

The otherwise solitary male opossum attracts a mate by making clicking sounds during breeding season, which occurs in late winter through early spring and then again in late spring through early summer. Females can produce 2-3 litters a year, as gestation lasts only 12-13 days. The opossum is the only marsupial living in Canada and the U.S.; the female has a pouch, where her young are nourished and continue to develop. At birth, each embryonic-appearing baby is the size of a honeybee and must crawl up into the mother's pouch and attach to a nipple. Not all her teats are functional, and babies that fail to find a working one will die. At around 70 days, they leave the pouch and join their mother on excursions, hitching a ride by clinging to her fur. They become independent at around 4-1/2 months. With myriad predators, including owls, hawks, bobcats, foxes and coyotes -- and an ironic propensity to get struck by cars while eating road kill -- the opossum rarely survives past 2 years in the wild.

Some parting trivia: an opossum can swim above and below the water, has a natural immunity to the venom of some snakes, rarely develops rabies and has more teeth than any other North American animal (50)! Perhaps coolest of all, the opossum will feign death as a defensive behaviour to discourage or shorten a predatory attack. It tips over and remains still for several minutes or even hours. A frozen rictus of needle-sharp teeth and noxious anal gland secretions add authentic flair to the performance. And the Ocademy Oward goes to...

Article by Margie Manthey

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Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She's summured on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.