

NATURE WATCHERS: AWESOME OPO

OBJECTIVES:

- Define marsupial and omnivore
- Describe the physical appearance of opossums
- List key characteristics of opossum habitats
- Summarize the diet of opossums

Supplies Needed:

- For intro: Opossum taxidermy, skull, fur. Displays.
- Game: Dice, stickers, and station signs.
- Craft 1: Mask templates, scissors, hole punch, and string.
- Scavenger hunt: laminated ticks

• Work from felt board with children

- What type of animal is an opossum?

1. They are mammals! What mammals do you know?
1. woodpiles. In addition, opossums are also found in tree hollows. Their sharp claws aid them in climbing by digging into the tree bark.
2. Opossums have also adapted well to urban living. People often find them in backyards, crossing the neighborhood street, or even in the garage. If unnoticed, an opportunistic opossum will make a nest in a garage or even attic spaces. This can lead to a variety of problems.

- Tracks and Signs

1. You can tell if an Opossum has been in the area from their tracks. Their toes are sharply angled, extremely asymmetrical, and their thumb sticks out very far. These tracks are about 2 inches in diameter, with their back feet being slightly bigger.
2. Fresh opossum droppings are brown in color and around 1-2 inches in length. It is smooth on the sides and a unique characteristic of opossum fecal matter is it tends to curl as the animal discharges the waste.

- Joeys!

1. Opossums give birth to typically 7 or 8 babies, or joeys, but can have up to 20 at one time. These newborns are extremely small—about the size of a honeybee—and without fur, sight or hearing. Opossum infants will continue to live in their mother's pouch for about two months after their birth, during which time they drink milk from their mother. Eventually the young become too large to stay in the pouch and will spend their time instead on their mother's back, using their opposable thumbs to grasp her fur while she travels. Young opossums typically spend about three months with their mothers before they are fully weaned and independent.

- Behaviors:

1. **How do you think opossums defend themselves? (ask children)**

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- What type of animal is an opossum?

1. They are mammals! What mammals?
2. When threatened opossums discharge feces from their bodies) When they “play possum”, and act as if they are dead, actually, the opossum has an involuntary comatose-like state induced by extreme fear (so basically, they faint). The body is limp or stiff, they roll over, close their eyes (or stare off into space), its front feet form into balls, bare their teeth, and drool runs out of its mouth or foams and a foul-smelling fluid is secreted from glands. This state can last from several minutes to several hours. Once the danger has passed, and the opossum “comes to” again it goes on his way. An effective deterrent to predators looking for a hot meal.
3. Predators include: owls, hawks, red foxes. Cats, dogs, and humans.
4. **Nocturnal means sleep during the day and awake at night. Diurnal means sleep during the night and awake during the day.**
5. **Do you think opossums are nocturnal? (ask children) (place arrows on board) (have a kid put nocturnal on board)**
6. Opossums are nocturnal; they are awake at night and sleep during the day. They spend nights searching for food. • They do not hibernate; opossums do slow down during the winter. They live in burrows that they fill with dry leaves or even shredded paper, and fat reserves help keep them warm. In the summer, they will lick themselves and cover their fur in spit to keep cool.

- What do opossums eat?

1. Opossums are omnivores. **(Have child put up word and have them sound the word out with you).**
This means they eat both plants AND animals. What sorts of things do you think they eat? **(Put up pictures of food sources)**
2. Small animals like snails, rodents and insects. They also like to munch on berries that they find in the forest.
3. With 50 teeth in their mouths, there are many possibilities. Opossums catch mice, birds, insects and even snakes to dine on. Grasses, nuts and fruit also make a great meal for the opossum.
4. **Why are they SO important?**

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- What type of animal is an opossum?

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*Eat ticks, and other disease car

further spread. One opossum can eat up to 5,000 ticks in a season and they do not carry or contract Lyme disease. 95% of opossums are naturally immune to rabies. They are very important for population control and disease control! They are basically nature's cleanup crew.

- **OPOSSUM FILL IN THE BLANK!**

READ BOOK: 10 minutes

-Read "Possum's Harvest Moon" by Anne Hunter.

MY OPOSSUM'S DAY GAME: 10 minutes

- Each child will get a worksheet that will help them move throughout the game.
- They will role one of the colored dies at a station. They will follow the number to the next corresponding station to pick up a sticker which is the next "phase" of their opossums' day.
- Children continue to play until they have collected all 6 stickers. (They only get one sticker per station).
- At the end of the game, have the children review what all their opossum got up to during the game.
 - **Materials Needed:** 6 dice, sticker sheets, glue, activity sheets, station sheets

CRAFT OPOSSUM MASKS: 10 minutes

- Children can color, cut out and fold their own opossum.
 - **Materials Needed:** mask, hole punch, string, crayons

OPOSSUM FOOD SCAVENGER HUNT: 10 MINUTES

- Explain the importance once again of opossums eating ticks.

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- **What type of animal is an opossum?**

1. They are mammals! What mammals?
- Have “ticks” hidden along the path.
 - The children are to look for them while taking the hike. The objective is to find as many ticks as possible as they are the “opossum” searching for “food”.
 - o **Materials Needed:** laminated ticks

WRAP UP: 5 minutes

1. Go over key points of the lesson and stations
2. Hand in materials
3. Clean up stations