



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

March 24, 2023



Nine orphaned Virginia Opossums



Orphaned Virginia Opossum

The Only Marsupial in the United States

Marsupials are a group of mammals that are characterized by their reproductive system, which includes giving birth to relatively undeveloped young that continue to grow outside of the mother's womb, typically in a pouch. Most marsupials are found in Australia and nearby islands, but there are a few species who reside on other continents. The only marsupial that makes their home in the United States is the Virginia Opossum.

It is common for people to confuse opossums with possums. The names are so similar that they are often used interchangeably, but they are actually referring to two different groups of animals. Opossums reside in North America and are known for their hairless prehensile tails, and their ability to "play dead" when threatened. Possums, on the other hand, are found in and around Australia, have furry tails, and will defend themselves when they feel threatened.

When an opossum "plays dead" they go into a catatonic state, which is a defense mechanism that is used to deter predators. When the animal first feels threatened, they will try to run away. If they are unable to escape, they will then fall onto their side and become still. The opossum's body will go limp, their eyes will glaze over, and they may even emit a foul-smelling odor from the anal glands. This gives the appearance that the animal has died. By appearing dead, the opossum may be less appealing to the predator and there is a better chance of them being left alone. The behavior is not voluntary and is triggered by stress or fear. Once the threat has passed, the opossum will gradually come out of the catatonic state (which can last for several hours) and resume normal activity.

Here at CWC we care for about 150 Virginia Opossums each year. The vast majority of these patients are orphaned babies who are rescued from mothers who have passed away. This was the case for the most recent nine opossum siblings that were admitted to CWC. All nine animals were taken from the pouch of their deceased mother after she had been hit by a car near East Hollywood. The opossums were briefly cared for at the North Central Animal Shelter, before being transported to our facility.



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Once at CWC, each patient received an initial intake exam. Luckily, even though their mother sustained life ending injuries, each of her babies were unharmed by the incident. The young animals were painted with nontoxic acrylic paint (to differentiate between individuals), provided fluid therapy, and placed in an incubator to mimic the warmth from their mother's pouch. The opossums are currently in our Orphan Care Unit, where they are being administered nutrition which is specially formulated for growing opossums. Within a few weeks they will be large enough to move into a small outdoor enclosure, prior to being transitioned into a large opossum enclosure in order to prepare them for release.

If you see an opossum that you suspect is deceased, contact CWC or your local wildlife rehabilitation center for advice on how to determine if the animal has passed away or if they are "playing dead." You can do even more to help wild animals in need by donating at cawildlife.org!