



# California Wildlife Center

## Patient of the Week

### July 26, 2024

## Let's Talk About Poop!

The droppings of our wildlife neighbors can tell a lot about who we share our environment with as well as important information about the animal's health status and diet. Some animals even use their poop to ward off predators! Our Wildlife Technicians depend on patient output and regularly conduct diagnostic testing to gain a deeper insight on the prognosis and progress of our patients.



### Opossums

Most people are familiar with the fact that Opossums play dead to deter predators, but another one of their defenses has to do with their poop. Opossums are known to eliminate when they are threatened by a predator, and the feces they produce often emits a rotting smell. Many predators prefer their prey to be live, so a foul and rotting fecal stench can dissuade them from pursuing the Opossum.

### Coyotes

Coyotes use their scat to mark their territory, communicate with other Coyotes and can also be a good indicator of their diet. Feces and urine are used to claim and mark territory; droppings are thought to be particularly present in areas that a pack feels must be defended most aggressively. Have you ever almost stepped on poop while on a hike? It might be coyote scat, planted there to warn a neighboring pack about a territorial boundary. In addition to scent marking, Coyote feces can say a lot about the local diets of the animal. Coyotes often eat the entirety of their prey, so hair and bone fragments are often found in their waste. In urban Coyote populations, human food is often found in their scat.



Cecal pellets or Cecotropes; image from [sandiegorabbits.org](http://sandiegorabbits.org).

Rabbit fecal waste; image from Andy by Anderson Hay.

## Birds

Most birds expel urine and feces simultaneously and do so out of one opening, called the cloaca. Bird waste usually presents as a runny white liquid with dark accents. Bird urinary output is actually uric acid which appears as white, runny and sticky. Birds excrete uric acid as opposed to urine; uric acid is not easily water soluble, which means that when it is expelled a minimal amount of water is lost. This evolutionary adaptation is important because it allows birds to conserve water which is particularly important in dry areas or in times of drought. The uric acid combined with feces is why bird poop is often white with areas of dark matter (fecal waste).

In addition to poop, raptors also regurgitate pellets that can tell a lot about their environment and diet. The small masses are undigested food, and are composed of fur, feathers, and bones. They can be fascinating objects to dissect, as through them we can discover what the bird has been eating, and what habitat they came from.



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### Rabbits

Rabbits produce two types of poop: fecal pellets and cecotropes (cecal pellets). These waste processes might appear to be the same, but they are different and serve two different purposes. Fecal pellets are feces, and rabbits eliminate 200-300 times a day! Rabbit poop is round, dry, and hard and indicative of their grazing herbivore lifestyle. Cecal pellets are composed of partially digested food and helpful gut bacteria and are actually eaten by the rabbit once eliminated. You can identify cecotropes by their bunched and grape-like appearance and sticky surface.

### Marine Mammals

When marine mammals are admitted to CWC they are put on several rounds of dewormer which usually minimizes the need for consistent fecal sampling. However, marine mammal waste is still a very important indicator of health and is monitored by our team who will note consistency, content and if any blood is present. Pinnipeds eliminate like humans but receive hydration from their food as they do not drink the ocean water.

Poop often gets a stinky reputation, but it can tell us a lot about the wildlife around us!



Owl pellet; image from Wikimedia Commons.



CWC Wildlife Technician studies a fecal sample.