



# California Wildlife Center

## Patient of the Week

### September 13, 2024

## The Virginia Opossum

Virginia Opossums are a frequent patient at CWC, this year alone we have already admitted 258! They are brought to us for a variety of reasons- animal caught, hit by a car, orphaned, or found sick. While some might only see them as scruffy scavengers prowling through trash cans, these nighttime wanderers are more interesting than many people know.

Opossums have an excellent sense of smell and very poor eyesight which work in their favor as they are primarily nocturnal and mostly active from sundown to sunrise. They use their strong olfactory system to find food in the dark of the night. Opossums have 1,188 genes devoted to smell; humans only have 396! They are omnivores, and while at CWC, eat a varied diet that changes based on their weight and stage of development.

Virginia Opossums are the only native marsupials found in North America. They have a pouch that they carry their young in until they are old enough to emerge. When baby Opossums, called Joeys, are born they are about the size of a jellybean, and immediately migrate to their mother's pouch where they stay for about 70 days to nurse and grow. Female Opossums only have 13 nipples; she may have more babies but only 13 will be able to eat and thus survive. Once out of their mother's pouch, the litter will continue to rely on and cling to their mother until they are about 100 days old and able to go about their lives independently.

It's important to note that opossum mothers don't keep track of their joeys. If a joey falls off while riding on the mother's back, she won't retrieve them. If you come across a lone opossum that looks like they should be with their mother, assess their size. If the joey's body length (from the nose to the base of the tail) is about the size of a dollar bill, they are probably old enough to be on their own. If the animal is smaller, they are likely orphaned and in need of help.

We currently have eight orphaned joeys in our care after their mother was found deceased. Initially, nine were admitted, but sadly one did not survive. If you come across a deceased adult opossum, there may still be surviving babies that can be rescued and rehabilitated by an authorized center. Use gloves to approach the animal, and if she has a pouch, gently lift it to check for joeys. If you find any, contact CWC or your nearest wildlife rehabilitation center for assistance.



Joeys ride on their mother's back.



Patients provided with a wheel for exercise.



Enrichment provided for opossums.