

What to do about opossums

How to coexist with our only backyard marsupial



LILLY BELL/ISTOCKPHOTO

Opossums are shy, nonaggressive creatures who have the misfortune of scaring people due to their rather odd appearance. Their open-mouth, defensive hissing is merely a bluff to look vicious, and if that doesn't work, they play dead (when really scared)!

Opossums are very beneficial animals, providing free pest control by eating things some people don't like, such as insects, snails, slugs and even small snakes and rodents. They'll even clean up spilled garbage and fruit that has fallen off trees. If there is an opossum in the area, don't worry—she's not a threat, and more than likely will be moving on in a short while.

Opossum seen on lawn or in tree

This is normal behavior, not cause for alarm. Opossums are typically active at dawn and dusk but can be seen at any time. They are not looking to attack or bother anyone; they are actually very gentle and harmless creatures (despite their scary looks!).

Opossum in trash can

Opossums, attracted by the smell of food, can get stuck inside trash cans from which they can't climb out. To get the opossum out of the trash can, slowly tip the can on its side; the opossum will come out when he's ready. (They don't move when scared, so it may take a while; they'll need some space and privacy to come out on their own.) A broom can be used to gently tip the trash can over if needed. After the opossum has left, get a secure lid for the trash can (or use bungee cords or get the Animal Stopper brand trash can) so the problem doesn't recur.

Opossums eating garbage

Like most wildlife, opossums will take advantage of open or spilled garbage containers, so the solution is better containment. Secure trash lids with bungee cords or get an Animal Stopper brand trash can (which has built-in bungee cords). Put the garbage out the morning of trash pickup or get an outdoor storage enclosure for trash cans from a home-building store. Trapping won't solve the problem; as long as there's a food source, animals will return to it.

Opossum in garage or home

Opossums may wander into garages if the door is left open. Remove access to food, birdseed bags or trash. Then open the garage door before dusk, sprinkle an 8-inch band of white flour under it and watch for exiting footprints. Shut the door once the animal leaves.

Every now and then, an opossum will get into a house through a pet door. Encourage him to leave by closing the doors to all rooms and opening the doors to the outside. Opossums are usually not aggressive, so you should be able to help them on their way by gently nudging them with a broom.

Opossum under deck/shed

No need to do anything. Opossums are nomadic and will leave on their own very soon. They are gentle and nonaggressive animals who will not attack anyone. If necessary, the deck or shed can be sealed off using an L-shape barrier design, but it is critical not to entrap animals or separate parents from babies, who will starve without them. (Note that there may be other wildlife using the deck or shed.) Seal off the deck with mesh while leaving one exit hole and putting a one-way door (or animal excluder available from Tomahawk Live Trap Co.) over that hole so the opossum can leave but not return. Leave the door in place for at least three days. Never use mothballs or ammonia to harass wildlife—the chemicals are harmful to both humans and animals.

Opossum in a window well

Put a 3-inch-thick branch or two-by-four board in the window well so the opossum can climb out. Rest assured—he won't jump up and attack! Be sure to get a window well cover (inexpensive from home-building stores) after the opossum is gone or this problem may happen again.

A "rabid" opossum

Surprisingly, opossums rarely—if ever—get rabies. If the opossum is hissing, drooling, swaying and/or opening his mouth really wide (so you can see all 50 teeth), he's just doing a bluff routine to scare you or a dog off. What you're seeing is normal defensive behavior. Move away or bring in pets for a little while, and the opossum will leave once he realizes that the threat is gone.

Dead opossum

If a clearly dead opossum is found in late spring or summer, and if it is safe to do so, check whether there are any surviving babies in her pouch that need to be detached. Gently nudge her with a stick to see if there's movement in the pouch. Because the babies are born as embryos, as many as 13 may be in the mother's pouch nursing. They can be difficult to detach from her teats but can be gently "unscrewed." The babies should immediately be taken to a wildlife rehabilitator.

Another possibility is that the opossum is just playing dead, which is a defense mechanism they use to protect themselves from predators. When an opossum is playing dead, no amount of disturbance (loud noise included) will get her to move until she's ready! If it is unclear whether an opossum is dead or playing dead, leave the area for an hour and check back to see if she's gone.



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Baby opossum alone

Baby opossums stay in their mother's pouch until they are about 2.5 months old and the size of a mouse. At this age, they ride on Mom's back and can sometimes fall off without her noticing. If the baby opossum is fewer than 7 inches long (not including the tail), she is too young to be on her own, and a wildlife rehabilitator should be contacted. If the baby's body length is longer than 7 inches (not including the tail), then she's big enough to survive on her own.

Why not set a trap?

Trapping rarely, if ever, solves wildlife problems. In fact, it usually makes matters worse. Even in studies where all the opossums were trapped out of an area, others from the surrounding area soon moved into the vacated niche. In addition, trapping often leads to starving young being left behind. It's much more effective to remove whatever is attracting the animal (food source, den site) and exclude animals from areas where they're not wanted rather than try to continually remove all the animals themselves.

Visit [humanesociety.org/opossums](https://www.humanesociety.org/opossums) for more information.