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Although there are several species of opossum in the Americas, the only species in North America is the Virginia opossum or just opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*), as pictured on the front cover. They are the only marsupials (meaning pouched mammals) found in the United States and Canada. Often described as ugly, beady-eyed, and rat-tailed pests, the opossum can be very misunderstood.

The female opossum gives birth to babies as small as honeybees that crawl into the mother's pouch and continue to develop. The babies are called joeys and the adult male and female are called jacks and jills. As the babies get larger, they will go in and out of the pouch and ride on the mother's back as she hunts for food. Opossum moms take their babies everywhere they go. They use their sharp claws to dig into bark and their long tails for wrapping around branches as they climb trees, where they spend most of their time resting or nesting in tree holes made by other animals.

Opossums are scavengers, and they often visit your backyard and other settlements to raid garbage cans, dumpsters, and other containers where food can be found. They are attracted to carrion and can often be spotted near roadkill. Opossums also eat grass, nuts, and fruit, and hunt mice, birds, insects, worms, snakes, and sometimes chickens. They also eat those annoying yard and garden pests such as snails, slugs, and insects, including ticks. In fact, studies have shown that a single opossum can kill as many as 4,000 ticks in a week, including those infected with Lyme disease. They do this by scratching, licking, and chewing away the ticks in their fur while grooming. But, if you want to keep opossums from visiting your back yard, be sure to keep fitted lids on garbage cans and don't leave pet food outside.

Although the opossum is not aggressive, as most people believe, their open-mouthed hissing can make them look vicious. That is their defense against predators, and when that doesn't work, they will "play dead" or "play opossum" by flopping onto their sides with their eyes closed or staring fixedly and extending their tongues to appear dead,



sometimes for hours at a time. People are also concerned with the risk of opossums carrying rabies. The fact is that rabies is extremely rare in opossums, most likely because they have a much lower body temperature than other warm-blooded animals.

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