

*Wildlife Damage Management, Internet Center for
The Handbook: Prevention and Control of
Wildlife Damage*

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

Year 1994

OPOSSUMS

Jeffrey J. Jackson

Extension Wildlife Specialist, Warnell School of Forest Resources,
University of Georgia, Athens, Georgia 30602

OPOSSUMS

Fig. 1. Opossum, *Didelphis virginiana*



Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Exclusion

Practical where opossums are entering structures.

Habitat Modification

Remove cover and plug burrows to reduce frequency of visits by opossums.

Frightening

Generally not practical.

Repellents

None are registered.

Toxicants

None are registered.

Fumigants

None are registered.

Trapping

Leghold traps.

Box traps.

Cage traps.

Body-gripping (kill) traps.

Shooting

Effective where firearms are permitted. Use a shotgun with No. 6 shot or a .22-caliber rifle.

Identification

An opossum (*Didelphis virginiana*) is a whitish or grayish mammal about the size of a house cat (Fig. 1). Underfur is dense with sparse guard hairs. Its face is long and pointed, its ears rounded and hairless. Maximum length is 40 inches (102 cm); the ratlike tail is slightly less than half the total length. The tail may be unusually short in northern opossums due to loss by frostbite. Opossums may weigh as much as 14 pounds (6.3 kg); males average 6 to 7 pounds (2.7 to 3.2 kg) and females average 4 pounds (1.8 kg). The skull is usually 3 to 4 inches (8 to 10 cm) long and contains 50 teeth — more than are found in any other North



PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF WILDLIFE DAMAGE — 1994

Cooperative Extension Division
Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources
University of Nebraska - Lincoln

United States Department of Agriculture
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
Animal Damage Control

Great Plains Agricultural Council
Wildlife Committee

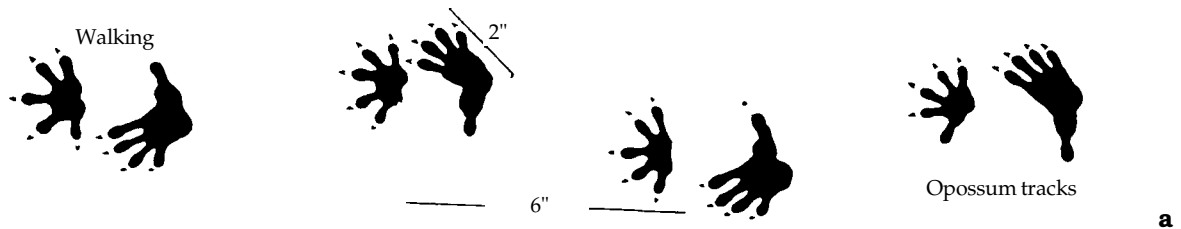


Fig. 2. Opossum sign and characteristics: (a) tracks, (b) droppings, and (c) skull.

American mammal. Canine teeth (fangs) are prominent. Tracks of both front and hind feet look as if they were made by little hands with widely spread fingers (Fig. 2). They may be distinguished from raccoon tracks, in which hind prints appear to be made by little feet. The hind foot of an opossum looks like a distorted hand.

Range

Opossums are found in eastern, central, and west coast states. Since 1900 they have expanded their range northward in the eastern United States. They are absent from the Rockies, most western plains states, and parts of the northern United States (Fig. 3).

Habitat

Habitats are diverse, ranging from arid to moist, wooded to open fields. Opossums prefer environments near streams or swamps. They take shelter in burrows of other animals, tree cavities, brush piles, and other cover. They sometimes den in attics and garages where they may make a messy nest.

Food Habits

Foods preferred by opossums are animal matter, mainly insects or carrion. Opossums also eat considerable amounts of vegetable matter, especially fruits and grains. Opossums living near people may visit compost piles, garbage cans, or food dishes intended for dogs, cats, and other pets.

General Biology, Reproduction, and Behavior

Opossums usually live alone, having a home range of 10 to 50 acres (4 to 20 ha). Young appear to roam randomly until they find a suitable home range. Usually they are active only at night. The mating season is January to July in warmer parts of the range but may start a month later and end a month earlier in northern areas. Opossums may raise 2, rarely 3, litters per year. The opossum is the only marsupial in North America. Like other marsupials, the blind, helpless young develop in a pouch. They are born 13 days after mating. The young, only 1/2 inch (1.3 cm) long, find their way into the female's pouch where they each attach to one of 13 teats. An average of 7 young are born. They remain in the pouch for 7 to 8 weeks. The young remain with the mother another 6 to 7 weeks until weaned.

Most young die during their first year. Those surviving until spring will breed in that first year. The maximum age in the wild is about 7 years.

Although opossums have a top running speed of only 7 miles per hour (11.3 km/hr), they are well equipped to escape enemies. They readily enter burrows and climb trees. When threatened, an opossum may bare its teeth, growl, hiss, bite, screech, and exude a smelly, greenish fluid from its anal glands. If these defenses are not successful, an opossum may play dead.

When captured or surprised during daylight, opossums appear stupid and inhibited. They are surprisingly

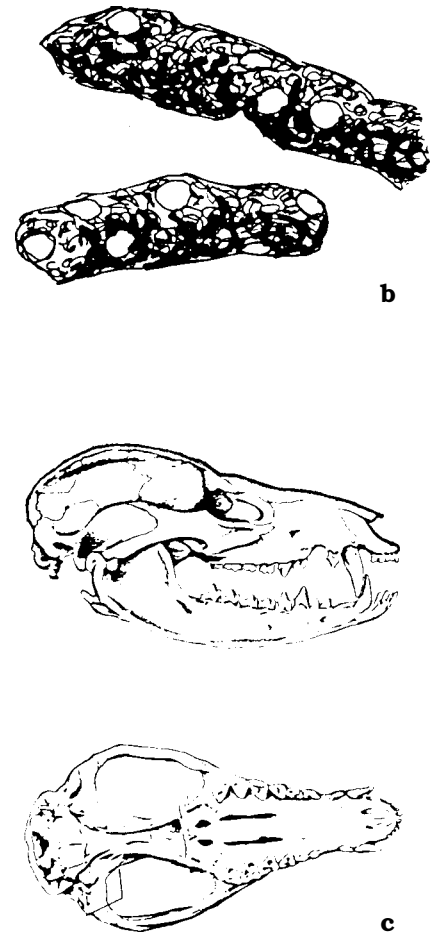


Fig. 3. Range of the opossum in North America.

intelligent, however. They rank above dogs in some learning and discrimination tests.

Damage

Although opossums may be considered desirable as game animals, certain individuals may be a nuisance near homes where they may get into garbage, bird feeders, or pet food. They may also destroy poultry, game birds, and their nests.

Legal Status

Laws protecting opossums vary from state to state. Usually there are open seasons for hunting or trapping opossums. It is advisable to contact local wildlife authorities before removing nuisance animals.

Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Exclusion

Prevent nuisance animals from entering structures by closing openings to cages and pens that house poultry. Opossums can be prevented from climbing over wire mesh fences by installing a tightly stretched electric fence wire near the top of the fence 3 inches (8 cm) out from the mesh. Fasten garbage can lids with a rubber strap.

Traps

Opossums are not wary of traps and may be easily caught with suitable-sized box or cage traps (Fig. 4). No. 1 or 1 1/2 leghold traps also are effective. Set traps along fences or trailways. Dirt hole sets or cubby sets are effective (Fig. 5). A dirt hole is about 3 inches (8 cm) in diameter and 8 inches (20 cm) deep. It extends into the earth at a 45° angle. The trap should be set at the entrance to the hole. A cubby is a small enclosure made of rocks, logs, or a box. The trap is set at the entrance to the cubby. The purpose of the dirt hole or cubby is to position the animal so

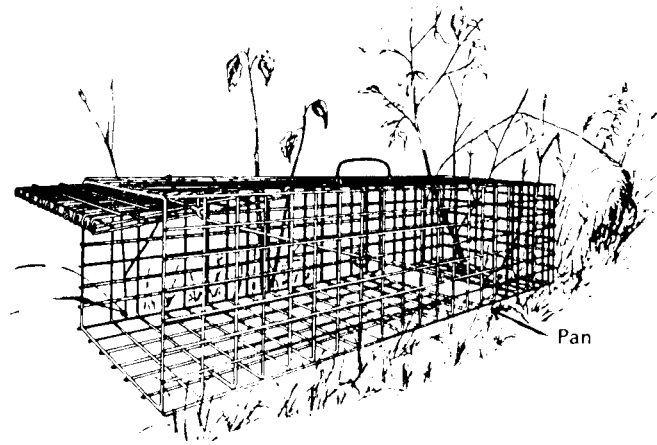
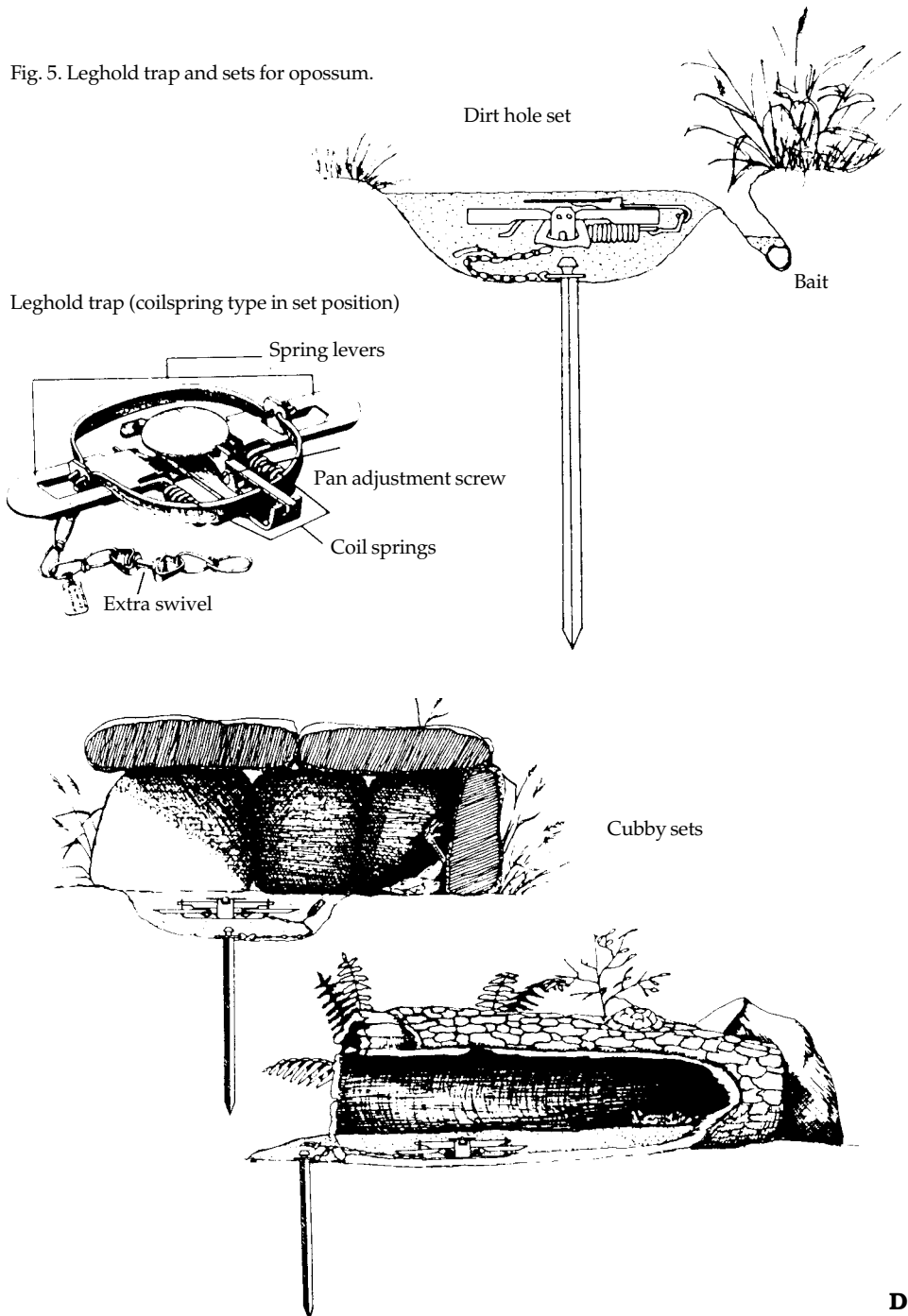


Fig. 4. Cage trap (set position).

Fig. 5. Leghold trap and sets for opossum.



that it will place its foot on the trap. Place bait such as cheese, or slightly spoiled meat, fish, or fruit in the dirt hole or cubby to attract the animal. Using fruit instead of meat will reduce the chance of catching cats, dogs, or skunks.

A medium-sized body-gripping (kill type) trap will catch and kill opossums. Place bait behind the trap in such a way that the animal must pass through the trap to get it. Body-gripping traps kill the captured animal quickly. To reduce chances of catching pets, set the trap above ground on a running pole (Fig. 6).

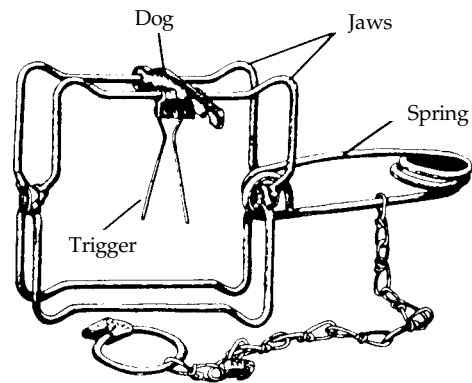
Shooting

A rifle of almost any caliber or a shotgun loaded with No. 6 shot or larger will effectively kill opossums. Use a light to look for opossums after dark. If an opossum has not been alarmed, it will usually pause in the light long enough to allow an easy shot. Once alarmed, opossums do not run rapidly. They will usually climb a nearby tree where they can be located with a light. Chase running opossums on foot or with a dog. If you lose track, run to the last place where you saw the animal. Stop and listen for the sound of claws on bark to locate the tree the animal is climbing.

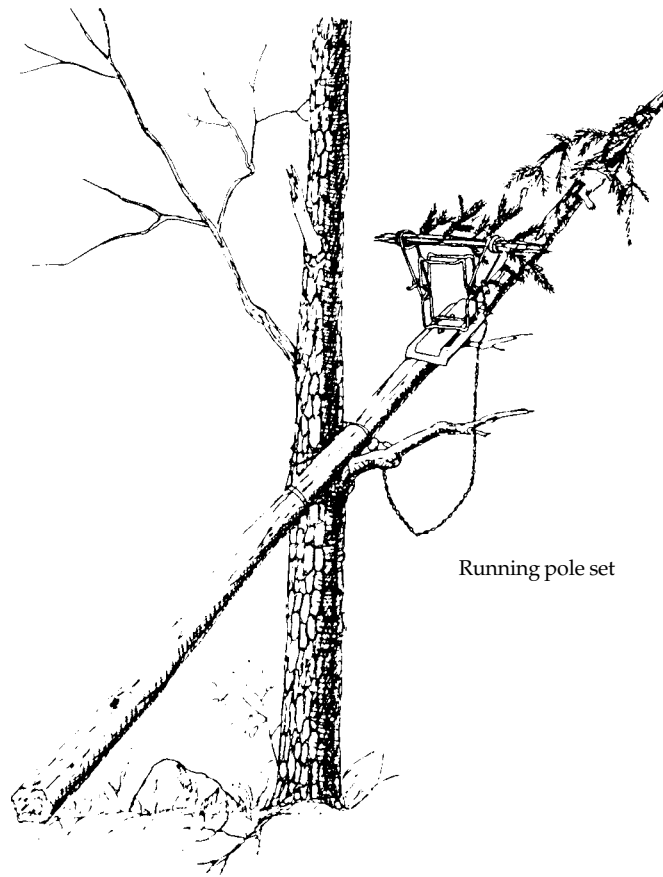
Sometimes opossums can be approached quietly and killed by a strong blow with a club, but they can be surprisingly hard to kill in this manner. They can be taken alive by firmly grasping the end of the tail. If the animal begins to "climb its tail" to reach your hand, lower the animal until it touches the ground. This will distract the opossum and cause it to try to escape by crawling. Opossums can carry rabies, so wear heavy gloves and be wary of bites.

Euthanize unwanted animals humanely with carbon dioxide gas, or release them several miles from the point of capture.

Fig. 6. Body-gripping trap and running pole set.



Body-gripping trap (set position)



Running pole set

Economics of Damage and Control

No data are available; however, it is usually worthwhile to remove a particular animal that is causing damage.

Acknowledgments

Much of the information on habitat, food habits, and general biology comes from J. J. McManus (1974) and A. L. Gardner (1982). The manuscript was read and improved by Jim Byford and Robert Timm.

Figures 1, 2a, 2c, and 3 from Schwartz and Schwartz (1981).

Figure 2b by Jill Sack Johnson.

Figures 4, 5, and 6 by Michael D. Stickney, from the New York Department of Environmental Conservation publication "Trapping Furbearers, Student Manual" (1980), by R. Howard, L. Berchielli, C. Parsons, and M. Brown. The figures are copyrighted and are used with permission.

For Additional Information

Fitch, H. S., and L. L. Sandidge. 1953. Ecology of the opossum on a natural area in northeastern Kansas. Univ. Kansas Publ. Museum Nat. Hist. 7:305-338.

Gardner, A. L. 1982. Virginia opossum. Pages 3-36 in J. A. Chapman and G. A. Feldhamer, eds. Wild mammals of North America: biology, management, and economics. The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, Baltimore, Maryland.

Hall, E. R., and K. R. Kelson. 1959. The mammals of North America, Vol. 1. Ronald Press Co., New York. 546 pp.

Hamilton, W. J., Jr. 1958. Life history and economic relations of the opossum (*Didelphis marsupialis virginiana*) in New York State. Cornell Univ. Agric. Exp. Sta. Memoirs 354:1-48.

Howard, R., L. Berchielli, C. Parsons, and M. Brown. 1980. Trapping furbearers, student manual. State of New York, Dep. Environ. Conserv. 59 pp.

Lay, D. W. 1942. Ecology of the opossum in eastern Texas. J. Mammal. 23:147-159.

McManus, J. J. 1974. *Didelphis virginiana*. Mammal. Species 40:1-6.

Reynolds, H. C. 1945. Some aspects of the life history and ecology of the opossum in central Missouri. J. Mammal. 26:361-379.

Schwartz, C. W., and E. R. Schwartz. 1981. The wild mammals of Missouri, rev. ed. Univ. Missouri Press, Columbia, 356 pp.

Seidensticker, J., M. A. O'Connell, and A. J. T. Johnsingh. 1987. Virginia opossum. Pages 246-263 in M. Novak, J. A. Baker, M. E. Obbard, and B. Malloch, eds. Wild furbearer management and conservation in North America. Ontario Ministry Nat. Resour. Toronto.

Editors

Scott E. Hygnstrom
Robert M. Timm
Gary E. Larson

