

Opossums

An opossum is a marsupial – the only marsupial that is native to North America. Marsupials are animals, like kangaroos, that have pouches in which to carry their young. Baby opossums are born in groups of about twelve. They are born tiny, blind and without fur. Females keep newborns in their pouches for about three months. Older babies cling to their mother's fur until they are too heavy to do so. Once they are big enough, they are on their own and begin to search for food themselves.

Opossums are omnivores. They eat both plants and animals. While they are often found eating out of garbage cans in people's yards, opossums are actually good to have around. They also eat unwanted plants and animals, including cockroaches, snails, dead animals and rotten fruit and vegetables. Because they are scavengers and have so many babies, there are many opossums in North America and the southern part of Canada.

Even though they seem to be filthy animals - probably because of their habit of eating rotten things and garbage - opossums are really very clean. They groom themselves often and will even stop eating to groom if the meal is getting very sloppy.

Opossums are well known for playing dead as a defense against predators. They do this in a very dramatic way, falling over with their mouths open and saliva running out. Before they resort to playing dead though, opossums will usually try to escape. If they can't escape, they may hiss, bare their teeth and growl in an attempt to discourage attackers. Only when none of this works do they finally play dead.

Another skill that opossums have is their ability to hang upside down and swing from tree branches with the help of their long gripping tails (called *prehensile* tails). Although it may seem like they can hang by their tails alone, only younger, lighter opossums can do this. Most need the help of their feet to keep from falling out of trees. In fact, opossums have feet that are a lot like human hands. They even have thumbs like humans that make it easier for them to hold on to branches and other objects. Very few other animals have thumbs like people. Even though they spend time in high places, most opossums prefer to live underground. They do not usually dig their own burrows but find homes that have been abandoned by armadillos and other animals to live in.

Opossums Questions

1. Which animal is the same kind of animal as an opossum?
 - a. a rat
 - b. a human
 - c. a kangaroo
 - d. a ferret

2. A marsupial is an animal that
 - a. is an omnivore.
 - b. has a prehensile tail.
 - c. has a pouch to carry its young.
 - d. All of the above

3. Opossums eat
 - a. dead animals.
 - b. garbage.
 - c. rotten fruit.
 - d. All of these

4. Opossums are
 - a. filthy animals that have a habit of eating garbage.
 - b. very clean animals.
 - c. rare in North America.
 - d. rare in the wild, but there are many in zoos.

5. Opossums are called scavengers because they
 - a. have excellent climbing skills.
 - b. eat garbage, dead animals and rotten fruits and vegetables.
 - c. steal the homes of other animals.
 - d. All of these

6. When an opossum is in danger, the first thing it will probably do is
 - a. play dead.
 - b. try to run away.
 - c. bare its teeth.
 - d. hiss.

Opossums Questions (Cont'd)

7. What do opossums have in common with humans?
 - a. We are both omnivore.
 - b. We have the same kind of thumbs.
 - c. Both of these.
 - d. Neither of these.

8. A prehensile tail
 - a. is very thick.
 - b. can be used to cling to branches.
 - c. is common to both opossums and kangaroos.
 - d. is necessary for an animal to be a scavenger.

9. Opossums live mostly in
 - a. burrows underground.
 - b. trees.
 - c. garbage cans.
 - d. nests.

10. Many opossums live in homes that have been abandoned by
 - a. kangaroos.
 - b. people.
 - c. rats.
 - d. armadillos.

Name _____



Date _____

Opossums Answers

1. c
2. c
3. d
4. b
5. b
6. a
7. c
8. b
9. a
10. d