Uninviting Our Wild Neighbors

Many of the reasons we enjoy our yards are often the same reasons that cause wildlife to feel at home. Our properties supply a quiet environment with plenty of food, water and cover. Take a look at your yard to see if you can make changes that can create a less hospitable place for these animals. Here are some suggestions:

- Remove or enclose woodpiles and thin dense vegetation to eliminate opossum hiding places.
- Remove all fallen or ripened fruit and vegetables on a daily basis.
- Cover compost piles and avoid composting human food items.
- Trim tree branches and shrubs away from the roof. You can also secure metal flashing around some trees to a height of about three feet to prevent climbing.
- Avoid leaving pet food and water sitting out when your pet is not outside.
- Make sure shed and storage area doors are tightly secured.
- Do not feed wild animals. It is illegal to feed predatory wildlife in the City of Los Angeles. (L.A.M.C. Sec. 53.06.5)
- Use deterrent methods to scare animals away.
- To prevent animals from falling into or building a nest in the chimney, install a screened fireplace cap.
- Ensure all gaps and eaves are securely screened. Secure crawlspace access screens with heavy duty construction cloth mesh of at least 16 or 18 gauge.
- If you do feed birds or squirrels, use feeders that are designed to cut down or prevent food from falling to the ground.

Tip: If you’re not sure whether a wild animal is currently under a house or shed, lay a thin layer of white flour in front of the opening, hole or space in question. Check the spot several times during the night. When animal tracks are seen leading away from the spot, you can secure the screen or hole. You may need to repeat this if there is more than one animal.
A Beauty Or A Beast

So, you came across a large, rat-like animal with a huge gaping jaw, sharp teeth and beady eyes. Did it snarl, growl and drip saliva? Did it have a hairless tail? Well, you've probably met one of our most common residents: Didelphis virginiana, the Virginia opossum.

Eastern Immigrant

There is documented evidence the Virginia opossum was first introduced in San Jose, California in 1910, by a New England immigrant. Despite being a rather simple-minded animal, opossums are a very successful species. They have adapted well to our Southern California environment.

One Of A Kind

Opossums have several unique features, some not shared by any other North American mammal. Opossums are marsupials, a relative of kangaroos, koalas and Tasmanian devils. They possess opposable thumbs and a prehensile tail, both used for gripping and climbing. It is a common myth that they can hang by their tails. Opossums also have 50 teeth, more than any other North American mammal. Marsupials raise their young in the marsupium (pouch) and are ready to leave the marsupium after about sixty days. Once old enough to leave the pouch around 1 to 2 months old, the youngsters hang onto the mother's fur as she travels about until they strike out on their own after about 3 months.

Life Habits & Diet

Opossums can and will eat a host of items, most of which are easily found in our backyards and city streets. Opossums are nocturnal and eat insects, snails and slugs which is beneficial to gardens. The also eat fallen fruit, carrion, eggs, improperly stored garbage, pet food and leftovers in the compost pile. Opossums are not very quick animals, nor are they great hunters of smaller mammals or birds. The opossum will seek shelter in locations such as abandoned nests of other animals, burrows, stream banks, wood piles, brush piles, trash heaps, sheds, crawl spaces, under decks, inside of unused automobiles and even storage boxes in the attic.

Appearances Can Be Deceiving

Because of the opossums rat-like appearance, they are a very misunderstood creatures. When threatened or cornered, opossums put up an impressive display of teeth, growls and drool. They will face their would-be attacker, making themselves as large as possible and shift back and forth. When attacked, opossums may ‘play dead’ by laying still and stiff with mouth agape. Biologists believe this is most likely an involuntary response, and is triggered by a release of chemicals into their bloodstream causing temporary paralysis. The paralysis subsides once the danger has passed and the chemical is purged from their system.

In an attempt to get at a meal, opossums are often caught in trash cans and are unable to get out. If possible, turn the trash can on its side to allow it to escape. Keep trash cans lids tightly secured or strapped to prevent further incidents.

Feeding Opossums?

It is unlawful to feed predatory wildlife in the City of Los Angeles. (53.06.5 L.A.M.C.) Feeding can increase the danger of the spread of disease and draws in larger predators. Wild animals fed by humans may quickly lose their natural fear and possibly attack without provocation. Wildlife habituated to humans feeding them often have to be destroyed because of the danger they pose to neighborhood pets and residents.

Life Habits & Diet

Opossums are often blamed for damage caused by other animals. Opossums are not generally known to fish Koi out of backyard ponds, cause lawn or yard damage or attack and kill neighborhood cats. Many residents are compelled to trap and remove opossums based on their looks and misinformation about their behavior. Despite trapping efforts, opossums will always be an abundant urban wild animal in your neighborhood. Rather than trapping the animal, it is better to remove food sources and maintain your property in a manner that is less inviting to them.

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