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Newsletter of Critter C

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## PERMANENT RESIDENT

### Panda: Opossum

Opossums are considered ancient mammals with ancestors that existed during the reign of the dinosaur. They are slow, clumsy and seem to have a basic intelligence level.

“The adult opossum (*Didelphis*

*marsupialis*) weighs about seven pounds. It’s face is elongated, narrow and cone-shaped. The opossum has black ears that are leathery in texture. Their tails are naked and scaly, and their feet are shaped like hands.”

Usually opossums have dense underfur that is white with grayish tips, and guard hairs that are dark gray or black making them appear grayish in color. Panda has pure white fur, rare but not unheard of. Opossums have black beady eyes set in the whitish head, and the feet are black with pink or white toes, but Panda’s feet are white and we know he isn’t an albino because his eyes are black not pink. “The female opossum has a woolly pouch on her abdomen for carrying and nourishing her newborn young. The skull of the opossum belies its ancient lineage because it contains 50 teeth, the most of any U.S. mammal.”

The breeding season for opossums begins in February. Young are born within two weeks after mating. From 10 to 20 offspring leave the birth canal and crawl to the female’s pouch. Helpless and less than an inch long, the offspring struggle to gain possession of one of the 13 teats contained in the pouch. The successful young remain attached to the teats for a month before they begin to leave the pouch for short periods. As they continue to grow, they are forced to abandon the pouch, and the mouse-sized youngsters retreat to the mother’s back, often clinging to her tail as she wanders in search of food.” Litters are not produced at any particular time but are born over a relatively long period from spring through fall in California. “Females can produce two litters per year. The young remain with the female for about three months. The final litter of the season may be traveling with the female when the first litter of the next year is born.”

“Aside from the overwhelming reproductive powers, a reason for opossum survival is their ability to eat nearly anything, vegetable or animal, in any state of decomposition. They serve as scavengers, thriving on foods discarded or rejected by other animals. Opossums eat eggs and young or fellow creatures and occasionally kill sleeping poultry and ground nesting birds. They do not hibernate, but amble forth in search of food in the night.”

They have few natural predators. Coyotes, domestic dogs, fox, and owls will prey upon them, but the opossum’s reproductive capabilities overcome any losses. Their slow travel pattern across roads and highways probably spells doom to more opossums than any other adversity.



Mature Red-tailed hawk

striped tail feathers which can  
shouldered Hawk (whether m

Red-tailed hawk black shoulder



The Swainson’s Hawk has longer more pointed wings with wing lining contrasting the wings’ flight feathers. With the exception of an immature Swainson’s, these hawks usually are dark reddish brown on the chest.