

SCIENCE in the Park

Virginia opossum

Didelphis virginiana

Family: **Didelphidae**

Omnivore / Prey

Native to Virginia



Also known as a possum, the opossum is a white-haired, worm-tailed mammal commonly found within the James River Park System. The opossum is a nocturnal omnivore, eating both plants and animals such as snakes, insects, other small mammals, and fruits. It prefers persimmons in the fall. They have a prehensile tail adapted to grasp and wrap around objects such as tree branches. The opossum will often hang upside down for short periods of time, but cannot sleep like that.

Fun Facts

- The Virginia opossum is roughly the size of a domesticated house cat.
- Like the raccoon, the opossum has adapted well to urban environments and is often seen foraging in trashcans and dumpsters for food.
- When the opossum is frightened, it will often play dead to avoid attack by predators. It is from this behavior that the term “playing possum” originates.
- The opossum is very resistant to snake venom and rarely contracts rabies, due to its low body temperature.
- Unlike other marsupials, the opossum is not very intelligent and has a brain that is five times smaller than that of the raccoon.