

Took to Journal Aug. 14 - 1944

2 neg.

## THE STUPID OPOSSUM THAT LIVES WELL

by

William L. Finley

"Possum am a cunnin' thing,  
He rambles in de dark,  
Nothin' 'tall disturb his min'  
But to hyah my bulldog bark."

We are glad that many children are interested in wildlife and like to get out into the fields and forests to watch birds, and especially find some of the animals they haven't seen. They see squirrels, chipmunks, rabbits, and other small animals, but not many of the larger ones.

One of the school teachers told us the boys had seen an opossum at the city zoo. They asked whether there are any opossums in this state. One boy said, "I have a book on the birds of Oregon, but haven't any on the animals." He was told that Vernon Bailey, formerly a member of the Bureau of Biological Survey of the Department of Agriculture, had published in June 1936 a book entitled "The Mammals and life Zones of Oregon."

"What's the difference between an opossum and a porcupine?" asked one boy. "I have never seen a porcupine." Since The Journal has published an article on the porcupine and shown pictures of it, here are the story and pictures of the opossum, showing the difference between the two animals.

Some years ago we brought back from the Los Angeles region of California a mother opossum and three young ones and took a good many pictures of the slow, fat mother and her children. Our dog was much interested in the family and tried to make up to them, until the mother spread her idiotic grin on her face, which almost spilled him over backwards in surprise. The opossum family was put in a wire pen in the back yard, fed raw eggs, fruit, and scraps from the table, with sometimes a piece of sweet potato to remind her of old Virginia nights. But although she was slow and dumb, she was also resourceful and persistent and soon dug under the wire, and with her children clinging to her back, was gone like the wind, swallowed up by the darkness.

2

In the southern states, the negroes think the opossum was especially created for their benefit. The fall moonlight opossum hunt is a sacred event in their calendar. A crisp October moon means the ripening of the 'simmons and the 'possums, and the windy melody of the hounds. The hunters prefer to capture their 'possum alive if possible, either knocking him from his perch with a stick or chopping down the tree.

The opossum is a marsupial or pouched animal. When first born, a kangaroo, a mouse, and an opossum are of nearly the same size, about half an inch in length. From six to twelve or more young are born in a very immature state, blind, helpless, hairless, looking like small pink beans weighing some eighteen grams. The mother immediately transfers the whole batch of young to her pouch on her abdomen where they attach themselves to the teats. Mother opossum is very prolific, having two or three litters a year. The young remain with her for two months or more, and when old enough to leave the nursery they travel around on her back for some time, clutching her long hair with their handy hands, or winding their tails around her tail or legs. Sometimes a brood of sucklings is found in her pouch while a second brood the size of rats are still riding around on her back.

In the wild state, the opossum sleeps in the day time hidden in a hollow tree or stump, or dozes half in sunshine and shade among the branches. She can climb to the top of a tall tree, dextrously using her tail and hand-shaped feet almost like a monkey. Sometimes she is found hanging head down by her tail, partly supported by one foot on a limb, reaching for berries, grapes or other fruit, especially persimmons. When the shadows of evening creep through the underbrush, she arouses and goes shuffling along among the leaves, picking up a cricket here, a lizard there, or anything else edible. She is very destructive to ground birds' nests, delighting in a meal of eggs or young. Her menu is large, taking in insects, wild fruits, nuts, berries, varied with roots, reptiles,

crayfish, carrion, rats, mice, and especially poultry, corn, and sweet potatoes. She loves young corn and will raid a field, breaking the stalks, clawing open the ears and feasting on the milky kernels. She is a big eater.

The opossum is an optimist when she exhibits her one weapon of defense, the trick of feigning death, sprawling out with a ghastly leer on her face, pale jaws open, withered ears and skinny tail, a most unedible looking object. Sometimes it works, but not as often as she expects.

Formerly the opossum was common in the southeastern United States from southern New York to Nebraska and Texas, but during the years it has spread out into other regions. Reports of opossums being liberated in Oregon date as far back as 1912. Some were introduced into California and Oregon at the same time, and now they are pretty well established. Stanley Jewett keeps pretty good track of both the birds and mammals in Oregon and furnishes an interesting account of the opossum. Scattering records of opossums being captured in this state date as far back as the early nineteenth century, and by 1928 and on they seemed to be pretty well settled here and thriving, especially in regions such as Umatilla County. There are records of fifty or more being taken in this region. Specimens proved to be the typical Virginia opossum, *Didelphis Virginiana* Kerr.