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Native Pest Control

For most people, there will always be native wildlife that they just aren't a fan of, but many of these scorned animals have an important role to play in their environment by filling the role of natural pest control.

Take, for example, the Virginia opossum, whose appearance causes many to see them at their worst. Virginia opossums have a coat of gray fur covering their chest, back, and legs, but a long naked tail. For many, that naked tail is too similar to that of rats and is an immediate turn off for getting to know this fascinating animal further. While opossums are a part of the marsupial family, due to the pouch that females have for their young to develop in, people tend to become focused on their tails. In reality, that long tail is just used for balance as they climb and explore their habitat looking for food. Many animals have tails for balance; theirs just happens to lack fur.

For people who aren't squeamish about the rat-like tail, they might develop a dislike for opossums if they find themselves in a face to face meeting with one because of their behavior. The Virginia opossum is nocturnal, so if you happen to meet one at night and the animal feels like there are no options to hide or escape, they will attempt to scare away the potential threat with their most impressive feature, their teeth. Opossums have the most teeth of any North American mammal, with fifty of them! So, they will show off their pearly whites in an attempt to frighten off what is scaring them. This behavior is called "alligator mouth" because of the resemblance to the toothy reptile when opossums show off their teeth. The likelihood of an opossum biting after this display is low, because in nature everything is about survival, and forcing a physical encounter puts the opossum at a greater risk of getting hurt or killed. If you spot drool coming out of the opossum's mouth, you don't need to worry about rabies because opossums are resistant to the disease. If you encounter an opossum, just back away and give them enough space to feel like you are no longer a threat to them.

Now, for some of you, this might be a laundry list of reasons not to like opossums, but I promise you that they are an important part of pest control in nature. You might not love opossums, but how do you feel about ticks? I bet the physical impact that black legged ticks can have on you and your family, with the spread of Lyme disease, puts them even lower on your animal popularity list than opossums. How would you feel about opossums if I told you that they love to gobble up ticks?

An opossum's diet is that of an omnivore, eating both plants and animals. Now the ratio of plants to animal protein is dependent on the time of year, what is growing or moving around, and where they are living in North America. In spring and summer, they will eat more plants and bugs as they become available. Ticks are a plentiful protein source for opossums and scientists have performed research showing that a single opossum can consume thousands of ticks each year! With opossums around to eat ticks, there are fewer ticks to bite us.

You don't have to love all animals equally, but many of nature's most underappreciated animals are beneficial to have around. So, next time you see an opossum give them some space, or if possible, slow down to allow them to cross the road. Without these helpful opossums, we would be dealing with a lot more ticks each year.