

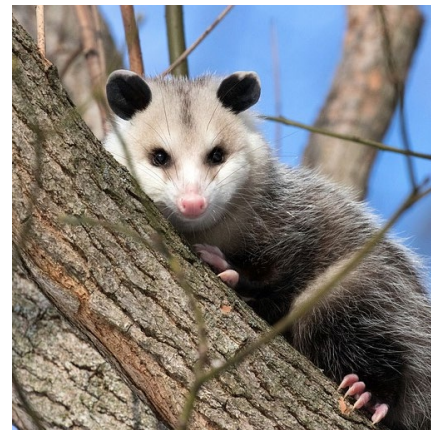
BCT Stewardship Journal: February 2025

Species Spotlight: The Opossum!

Among the many nocturnal residents here on Cape Cod are opossums, the only marsupials native to North America. Though often misunderstood, these remarkable animals play an important role in our local ecosystem.

Opossums are typically solitary animals that thrive in various habitats, from woodlands and fields to suburban neighborhoods. While more common in the south, they have adapted to living as far north as Cape Cod due to their tolerance for colder temperatures. One of the most unique features of opossums is their adaptability. They have a wide diet that includes insects, fruit, small mammals, and even carrion (dead animals). Their flexible diets help control pests and recycle nutrients back into the ecosystem. They also love to eat ticks, helping to reduce the population of these concerning parasites.

When identifying opossums, observing their tracks can be a fun activity, especially now during the winter months with snow on the ground. Opossum tracks are distinctive with five toes on both their front and hind feet with a small opposable toe on the hind foot that gives them an almost hand-like appearance. Their tracks are typically about two inches in length, and they can leave a unique “4-leaf clover” imprint in the snow or mud.



Some view opossums as pests, but in addition to pest control, they also help clean up our ecosystems by consuming dead animals and reducing the risk of disease spread. In fact, opossums are known to not be able to carry rabies or most other diseases due to this diet. Their presence indicates a healthy ecosystem. If you are fortunate enough to spot an opossum in your yard or along a trail, know that they are gentle creatures, even with their 50 teeth! If threatened, they may resort to their infamous “playing dead” defense mechanism, a strategy that has helped them survive for millennia. These creatures are not merely “roadkill” but are vital components of our ecosystem. Next time you see those

identifiable tracks in the snow or mud, you’ll know that a beneficial nocturnal neighbor is nearby, ready to help clean up the neighborhood!