

Problems with opossums



Opossums are only active at night and low-light hours, opossums might never be seen as they travel through neighborhoods or yards. Barking dogs and disappearing pet food left out overnight may be the first apparent clues. They may den under steps, porches, decks, garden tool sheds, and if accessible, in attics, garages, and beneath houses, where they make an untidy nest of sticks and whatever else may be available. There are typically two mating seasons for opossums in California: January through February, and June through July. After a short 13-day gestation period, the tiny, hairless young are born. Like other marsupials, the blind, helpless young find their way into the mother's pouch where they each attach to one of the 13 teats. At approximately 11 weeks of age they can leave the pouch for short periods and are weaned at about 14 weeks.

The nocturnal opossum is a true omnivore, feeding on fruits, nuts, green plants, insects, snails, snakes, frogs, birds and their eggs, and small mammals such as meadow voles, mice, and rats. It is not good to feed wildlife, either intentionally or unintentionally. Don't leave pet food outside at night, keep ripe fruit picked, keep garbage cans securely covered or inside a garage at night.

Wildlife cannot be relocated. A territory left open by removing an animal will be quickly filled by another. It is also illegal in California to relocate animals or to raise them as pets.

Under house

Find the entrance, usually a loose vent cover. Wait until the opossum comes out, and then securely close the hole. Sprinkle flour or cornstarch on the ground around the opening so you can more easily check for footprints to see if the opossum has come out. The combination of lights and noise is very effective. Give it at least a week to work.

In attic

Find the entrance, usually a loose vent cover. Wait until the opossum comes out, and then securely close the hole. Sprinkle flour or cornstarch around the opening so you can more easily check for footprints to see if the opossum has come out. Prevent access to the roof or attic by trimming overhanging branches or wrap metal guards at least 18" wide around trees or posts 5' above the ground.

Under deck

Screen the area under the deck using welded wire or other strong material. Leave one opening, and then close it securely after it comes out. Make sure there are no babies still under the deck. Sprinkle flour or cornstarch on the ground around the opening so you can more easily check for footprints to see if the raccoon has come out.

Eating pet food

Don't leave pet food outside at night. Feed pets indoors or put food outside only during the daytime. Pet food should be stored indoors or in a secure metal container.

Coming into the house

Close the door. If coming through a pet door, close the pet door.

Getting into garbage can

Fasten garbage can lids securely. Rope or chain should work. To prevent toppling of the can, place the can in

some kind of anchored rack or tie it to the fence. Keep the can in the garage. Use repellent on and around the can.

Digging in lawn

On occasion opossum have been known to hunt for grubs and worms in the lawn. Treat your lawn for grubs (insect larvae that eat grass roots) at the beginning of the summer so there will be no food available in late summer and fall when the raccoons are most likely to dig in lawns. Beneficial nematodes are a good non-toxic way to kill the grubs; see your nursery for advice. Skunks will usually stop digging in lawns at the start of the rainy season.

- Sprinkle the lawn with finely ground black pepper or cayenne pepper.
- Use dog and cat repellent around the perimeter of the lawn and the perimeter of the yard to keep skunks away from the lawn.
- Cover the lawn with welded wire so skunks cannot dig into it. The lawn will grow up through the wire, and will become hidden very shortly. It's okay to mow over the wire.
- Make sure opossum are not living on your property (under house, etc.).
- Use a light with a motion detector.
- Use a radio playing a talk show throughout the night.
- Use an infrared/motion detector-activated sprinkler to spray animals with water.
- Fence the yard with electric fencing.
- Water the lawn less to make the soil less soft and easy to dig in for food.

Eating produce from the garden

Fence the garden with a flimsy chicken wire fence that won't support the opossums's weight. Install an electric fence. Keep ripe produce picked. Use dog and cat repellent around the perimeter of the garden.

Using ammonia as repellent

Soak cotton balls with ammonia, place cotton balls in small bowl. Don't block entrance with ammonia.

Using dog/cat repellent

Not all opossums respond to repellent in the same way. Initially, use lots in a wide area.

Out during the day

If an opossum is acting normally, it is probably OK. Striped skunks are primarily active at dawn, dusk, and at night but can be active during the daytime. If a skunk is acting abnormally or appears ill, call your local animal services.

Opossums carry diseases such as leptospirosis, tuberculosis, relapsing fever, tularemia, spotted fever, toxoplasmosis, coccidiosis. They may also be infested with fleas, ticks, mites, and lice. Opossums are hosts for cat fleas. This flea infestation on opossums is associated with the transmission of flea-borne typhus in prevalence in Orange and Los Angeles Counties.

For Questions or assistance with Opossum Problems

Contact Alameda County Vector Control Services District at (510) 567-6800 or www.avcsd.org