Monodelphis domestica

SHORT-TAILED OPPOSUMS

**Common Names:** Brazilian gray short-tailed opossum

**Habitat and Range:** Primarily terrestrial. Found in deciduous forest and in and around houses and agricultural land. The southern rim of the Amazon Basin, from Bolivia and Paraguay to eastern and central Brazil, north to Ilha Marajo.

**Description:** Dense, short fur. Tail is sparsely haired except for the base which is well-furred; slightly prehensile. They have large, naked ears. Apparently there are slight color variations and markings depending upon the population and in which part of the range it is found. Most tend to be pale gray with whitish feet; under parts dirty white to pale gray with an orange tinge. Tail tends to be darker on the upper part. Females have no pouch. Newborn opossums cling to the nipples arranged in a circle on the abdomen. Later they ride on the back and flanks of the mother.

**Adult Size:** males average 3 to 5 oz., females 2.8 to 3.5 oz.; length 4 to 7.8” long; tail 1.7 to 3” (about half as long as the head and body).

**Diet in the Wild:** Small rodents, insects, scorpions, earthworms, carrion, seeds, fruit, etc.

**Reproduction:** In the tropical portion of their range they breed throughout the year. They produce up to four litters annually with five to twelve young after a gestation of 14-15 days. Dependence lasts about 50 days; sexual maturity reached at four to five months. Nests are built in hollow logs and in fallen tree trunks that bridge streams or among rocks.

**Life Span:** Approximately two to three years.

**Perils:** Carnivores and birds of prey; possibly snakes.

**Protection:** Opossums have a large number of teeth and are capable of opening their mouths very wide (up to 90 degrees) and maintaining that posture for at least 15 minutes which might intimidate some predators. Their small size and coloration may provide some protection.

**Interesting Facts:** Little is known about the short-tailed opossums and resources vary somewhat on specific details. They seem to be among the least adapted didelphids for arboreal life and are typically found on the ground. Most are thought to be nocturnal.

Opossums as a group are solitary, nomadic animals and do not defend their territories. They have many nest sites within their range which are used alternately. When two animals meet there is no interaction unless they venture too close to one another. This usually precipitates threat displays which consist of open mouth and hissing. The critters then go their separate ways. If aggression does ensue (more likely among the males), hissing becomes a growl and then
a screech. Opossums exhibit neither elaborate courtship displays nor long-term pair bonding. The male typically initiates contact, approaching the female while making clicking vocalizations. A non-receptive female will either avoid contact or show aggression. Smell is very important in communication.

When introduced into various parts of the world, opossums have shown amazing adaptability, using a variety of natural and human-made structures for dens, eating just about anything that’s available, including garbage, and competing with raccoons, dogs and human technology. Most didelphids are capable of entering a lethargic state similar to hibernation and “sleep” through cold or dry periods when food is scarce. Body temperature, rate of respiration and heart beat all slow, decreasing the body’s metabolic rate until conditions are more favorable. Further, marsupial reproduction has at least one advantage over that of most placental mammals. A female marsupial invests relatively few body resources during the brief gestation period. Her major commitment comes later during lactation, a phase which is more environmentally sensitive and more easily terminated by adverse factors. The marsupial that loses her young is, therefore, able to make a second attempt at reproduction more quickly and in better condition than a placental mammal in a comparable situation.

**Ecology:** The species *M. domestica* received its Latin name because of its habit of living in human dwellings where it consumes rodents and insects. It is considered a welcomed guest by the locals.

**Diet at the Zoo:** Nebraska Feline Diet (NFD), mealworms, crickets, banana.