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Pop-up possums! Everything you need to know about Toronto's newest immigrants

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BY ALEXANDRA POSADZKI November 17, 2010 15:11

Think you've spied an impossibly large rodent lurking around your yard of late? Don't worry, it's probably just a possum (or an opossum, if we're getting technical). Brad Gates, owner and president of [AAA Gates' Wildlife Control](#), says his company has fielded an increasing number of calls in recent years from city residents mistaking the marsupials for rats. "I would say this year's population is up," says Gates, "because of the mild winter we had last year." Experts guess that the creatures – which reside throughout most of the US – may have hitched a ride past customs in the backs of trucks, or simply migrated further north thanks to global warming. "Where we used to only get possum calls in the Mississauga and Brampton areas, the calls are now coming in from as far east as Oshawa and Whitby," says Gates, "so they're making progress across the GTA." Last year, the Toronto Wildlife Centre admitted 73 injured possums to their hospital, according to executive director Nathalie Karvonen.

This year's number is on track to be slightly lower, which Karvonen chalks up to the suggestion that Toronto's newest immigrants are adapting to our frigid, concrete jungle.

They don't hibernate: Although possums can store up a few weeks' worth of body fat, they still forage for food in the snow. Unfortunately, because possums come from a warmer climate, they frequently suffer from frostbite on the tips of their ears and their tails during harsh Canadian winters.

They're talented: Like monkeys, possums have a prehensile tail that they use to balance and to wrap around branches. Unlike monkeys, They don't actually hang upside down from trees like one sees in cartoons.

They're mostly harmless: possums are not as strong or fast-moving as raccoons, preferring to make meals from scavenged fruit, meat or birdseed left behind by other animals. When threatened, they play dead and secrete a rat-like stench.

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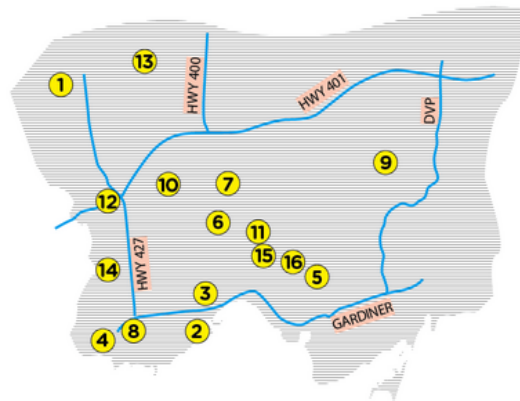
Eight to 14: Typical size of a possum litter. Moreover, opossums often breed more than once a year, explaining their fast spread across the city.

50: Number of teeth in a possum’s mouth, more than any other mammal.

POSSUM 911

This six-month log of injured marsupial calls across Toronto:

1. Nov. 4 - Goreway and Morning Star
2. Nov. 4 - Symons and Wheatfield
3. Oct. 17 - The Queensway and Park Lawn
4. Sept. 21 - QEW and Dixie
5. Aug. 25 - Queen and Bathurst
6. Aug. 23 - Jane and Dundas W.
7. Aug. 18 - Weston and Eglinton W.
8. July 30 - Browns Line and Horner
9. July 14 - Eglinton W. and Laird (litter of 15)
10. July 17 - Eglinton W. and Islington
11. June 26 - Dupont and Dundas W.
12. June 23 - Eglinton W. and Renforth (litter of 4)
13. June 6 - Kipling and Albion
14. June 1 - Bloor W. and Mill
15. May 27 - Dundas W. and Bloor W.
16. May 26 - College and Dovercourt



A FAMILY AFFAIR

The most interesting possum call Brad Gates has ever received occurred in the fall of 2009. It came from a homeowner near Broadview and Danforth, whose kitchen fruit basket was being mysteriously emptied overnight. “We searched the house and we were unable to find out where this animal was or even identify how it may have gotten into the house,” said Gates, “until we decided to check the stroller.” A possum, perhaps nostalgic for the marsupial pouch where it had spent its youth, had taken up residence in the elasticized pocket on the back of the stroller, sleeping there during the daytime and venturing out for food at night. When the weather turned colder, the family had brought the stroller – which had been sitting in the yard – into the basement, unaware that the possum was inside. “They actually introduced it into their own basement,” said Gates.

Email us at: LETTERS@EYEWEEKLY.COM or send your questions to EYEWEEKLY.COM

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hit YouTube, the internet exploded in outrage and anticipation.

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