

Opossums ^[1]

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Opossums

by Wynne Dough, 2006

See also: [Slow Poke the Possum](#) ^[2]

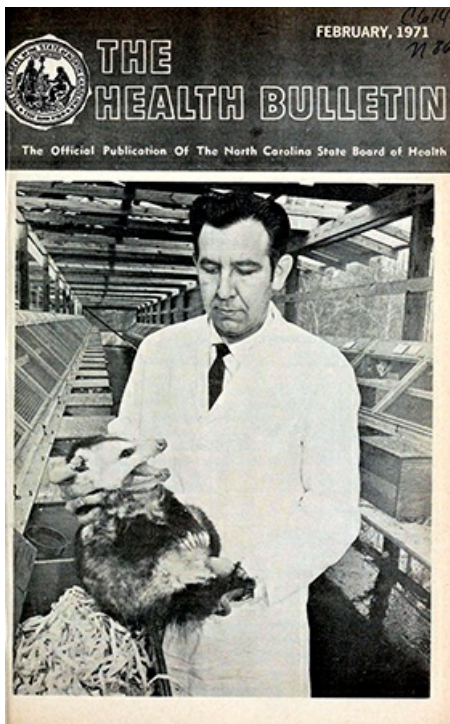


Picture of an opossum taken January 12, 2010 in Durham, North Carolina. Image from Flickr user cotinis.

^[3]Opossums (from the Powhatan Indian word *aposoun*) are the only marsupials indigenous to North Carolina and the United States. Formerly trapped in great numbers for their fur, which was used for various inexpensive items, they were once confined to the southeastern and south-central United States but are now common from southern Canada to Argentina, even in cities, often becoming agricultural and household pests. The night-roaming opossum eats carrion and deals with threats by displaying its 50 sharp teeth or slipping into fear-induced catatonia ("playing 'possum").

North Carolinians of all races have shunned the opossum as unsanitary, celebrated its comas and illusory cleverness, and considered its meat to be a requisite of gracious living. The opossum hunt, customarily held under a waning autumn moon by groups of men with dogs, artificial lights, and strong drink, was once an important social event in rural areas. Some epicures still consider opossum a delicacy when the animal is taken alive, given clean food to improve its flavor, and baked with sweet potatoes. "Possum 'n' 'taters" reached the height of respectability in North Carolina during the gubernatorial administrations of [William Kerr Scott](#) ^[4] (1949-53) and his son [Robert Walter Scott](#) ^[5] (1969-73). From 1970 to 1973 the [National Hollerin' Contest](#) ^[6] in Spivey's Corner included a "Prettiest Possum" competition. Public outcry saved the first winner, [Slowpoke](#) ^[2], from the gubernatorial table.

North Carolina place names inspired by the opossum include Opossum Swamp [Sampson County](#) ^[7]; two Possum Branches ([Macon County](#) ^[8]); Possum Quarter ([Pasquotank County](#) ^[9]); Possum Neck Swamp ([Craven County](#) ^[10]); Possum Swamp ([Pamlico County](#) ^[11]); Possumquarter ([Warren County](#) ^[12]), the estate of Governor [Gabriel Johnston](#) ^[13] (1699-1751), and its probable namesake, Possumquarter Creek; Possumtown, now Bethany ([Davidson County](#) ^[14]); and Possumtrot Community and Creek ([Yancey County](#) ^[15]).



The cover of The Health Bulletin, February 1971. Dr. Jurgelsky removes an opossum from a nest box in the building developed at the National Institute of Environmental Health Sciences, Research Triangle Park, to house the opossum breeding colony. Individual cages and nest boxes are seen to either side. In order to avoid a painful, and often severe bite on the hand, the animals must be restrained by quickly and firmly grasping the nape of the neck.

^[16] **Reference:**

William David Webster, James F. Parnell, and Walter C. Biggs Jr., *Mammals of the Carolinas, Virginia, and Maryland* (1985).

Additional Resources:

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Image Credits:

Coin, Patrick. "possum." Durham, N.C. January 12, 2010. <https://www.flickr.com/photos/pcoin/4269888951/> [3] (accessed August 23, 2012).

Cover of *The Health Bulletin* 86. No. 2. February 1971. North Carolina State Board of Health. <https://archive.org/stream/healthbulletinse86nort#page/n21/mode/2up> [16]

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