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CROW Case Of The Week:

Virginia Opossum



by Emilie Alfino

There are undeniably animals around that human beings, right or wrong, consider to be pests, but if it becomes impossible to live with them, there are humane ways to deal with

it. One of these animals is the Virginia opossum. A solitary and nocturnal animal about the size of a domestic cat, the opossum is a marsupial – and a successful opportunist. Originally native to the eastern United States, the species was intentionally introduced into the west during the Great Depression, probably as a source of food. Since then, its range has expanded.

An adult male opossum came to CROW (Clinic for the Rehabilitation of Wildlife) on October 6 with no accompanying information about who found him. The only history staff had was that someone thought the animal had been shot with a BB gun. The opossum showed up at one of CROW's drop-off sites, quiet but alert and responsive.

The first order of business was to take X-rays, which revealed three BB pellets in his head, three in his front left leg, and two in his neck region – eight pellets total, meaning the shooter fired eight



Virginia Opossum

separate times.

"These BBs were not lead, so there was no concern about poisoning. Most of the wounds were superficial – you could see the BBs just upon visual examination," explained CROW Wildlife Rehabilitator Robin Bast. "We were able to sedate him and remove a lot of those."

Five of the pellets were removed, but the three in his leg had to be left alone. Those were not superficial wounds, and attempting to remove them would have been too invasive, according to Bast. "They will remain in his body and he can do fine – as long as they're not lead and depending on where they are. These



This X-ray shows the location of eight BB pellets someone fired into this animal

were not in a joint, luckily. His body will probably wall off and effectively isolate these BBs so they can't shift.

Why would someone shoot eight BBs into a small animal? Bast believes someone was either shooting for fun or didn't want him where he was. "A lot of people see opossums as pests – they're going to scavenge and they're going to dig – but people don't understand every animal has a place in the ecosystem and that it has an effect if one is removed," Bast stressed.

Once the BBs were removed, an antibiotic cream was used on the wound sites and the opossum was given oral antibiot-

ics and pain medications as well.

Pain medications are used frequently at CROW, and determining when an animal is in need of this treatment isn't easy. "Wildlife is interesting as far as determining how much pain they're in. They're not going to show you because in the wild it makes them vulnerable to predators. So we have to assess pain level by the type of injury and how we would feel in a similar situation," Bast said.

For example, the Virginia opossum will play dead rather than show vulnerability to predators. This is where the term "playing possum" came from. Despite

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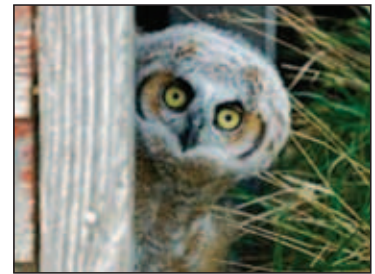
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