Minnesota’s Only Marsupial

By Elise Bushard, Interpretive Naturalist

When I first saw it cowering in my backyard one night, I was startled. I shined my flashlight at it and felt a bit afraid. Would it hurt me? Did it always live in my backyard or had it just wandered in that night? What was it eating? I was not a fan of this uninvited, whitish-gray mammal with numerous sharp teeth, then, something changed. I read an article about ticks and how Opossums were the best animal to have around to get rid of ticks because they eat up to 5000 of them in a week. I decided it could stay.

These mammals whose full name is Virginia Opossum, were not around the Twin Cities when I was a child in the 1970s. The first time I saw one was in the 1990s. I noticed it’s almost bare tail and ears, not at all suited for Minnesota winters. But that tail has special abilities. The Opossums can hang by that prehensile tail like a monkey. What a great trick! The ears can hear but are often damaged by frostbite and are broken off. On their paws, they have a thumb-like toe that can even work like an opposable thumb. With its special tail and thumb, you would think it was closely related to a monkey. It is in fact a close relative of a kangaroo, it is hard to believe a kangaroo relative could live in North America but it does. Opossums, kangaroos and koalas are marsupials, a group of mammals that carry their young in a pouch when they are first born.

The Virginia Opossums, often called “possums,” are originally from the south, but have lived in parts of southern Minnesota for just over a century. They can be light gray to whitish or even dark gray to almost black. No matter which shade of gray they are, their nose is usually pink. If they feel threatened, they will click their teeth, growl or even screech. They are roughly the size of a house cat (about 4-15 lbs.) with males being a little bit larger than females. They mate in the winter or spring and give birth to litters of six to twenty each year and can have up to two litters each year. They carry their young in their pouch for about two months, sometimes longer. Imagine carrying 20 babies around for 2 months or longer!

The word "Opossum" is an Algonquin Indian name meaning "white animal." From prehistoric time to modern day, the opossum is virtually unchanged. Some scientists refer to it as a living fossil. Opossums are crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk) and nocturnal, spending most of this time searching for food. They have a keen sense of smell and may also rely on touch to find food. When frightened or startled, opossums can feign death (or 'play possum'). Curled up on the ground with its mouth open and tongue hanging out, the opossum appears dead. They may also release fecal matter and release a green, foul-smelling mucus excreted from its anal glands. Their breathing slows and stays that way for a few minutes up to several hours. During this display, they can be poked and prodded or even bitten by another animal without giving any signs of suffering. Playing possum may allow them to not get eaten by predators since most animals will not eat carrion or dead animals. Scientists have yet to determine whether feigning death is deliberate or an involuntary reaction. Some believe chemicals are released into the brain and cause a temporary coma, but recordings of brain activity show that the opossum is in a highly alert state while feigning death.

In case you think they are cute little animals and want to pet them, think again! Opossums have fifty razor sharp teeth; the highest number of teeth found in any land mammal. Opossums are scavengers, which makes them extremely important to any habitat. By eating carrion, they lower the risk of spreading disease in the area.

If you have never seen a Virginia Opossum, hang out by Lowry’s birdfeeders after dark and watch. They will appear and be busy enjoying the black sunflower seeds. This versatile omnivore is not picky and busily eats this high protein snack.
News from the Corner... Back to the Future  by Allison Neaton

2019 was a year of reflection and celebration as we focused heavily on our 50th anniversary. It was also a year that ironically was filled with some staffing changes. Throughout our 50 years, carrying out the vision of Goodrich and all those who followed has meant having passionate and dedicated staff and volunteers. And, it has also meant instilling a passion and vision into staff and volunteers who go on to share their passions with other communities and organizations. Change can be hard, but it is also when we stretch the most. Change encourages us to evaluate and grow how we can best instill within our patrons and attitude of curiosity and affection for all living things.

Our 50th anniversary event was wonderful. And to those of you who were able to join us, we hope that you felt as inspired and proud to be a part of the Lowry legacy as we all did. Truly, what we do each day is not possible without the contributions of each of you and all those who came before us. We have fully celebrated 50 years. But certainly our story isn’t done. There will be more growth and more changes in the coming years. There is more education to be done. There are more community groups to connect with. There are more people to inspire. In each new generation, there are new challenges as the human connection to the natural world face more obstacles. There is more influence needed to encourage choices that support the health of our planet.

Enchanted Forest Halloween Fun

A huge Thank You to the many volunteers that helped make our Enchanted Forest Halloween a huge success. This year saw a total attendance of 762 people. This was slightly down from the record breaking year we had last year but we also did not advertise or promote this year as heavily as it came right on the heels of the 50th anniversary celebration and our efforts were focused on that. We were very happy with the attendance number.

We had an amazing turn-out of volunteers including many high school volunteers who assisted us by dressing up in costumes, running carnival games and more. We were also joined by a number of long-time ongoing LNC volunteers who brought their experience to the event which was appreciated. It takes 46 volunteers to make this event run smoothly!
News & Updates

Spotlight on Staffing Changes.
It was a year of changes for our staff as we said goodbye to both Brianna Rodgers and Dre Wakely. Brianna left in the spring to take a position at Woodlake Nature Center in Richfield. Even with increased hours of work, her shorter commute means more time with her newborn baby and we’re happy she’s still a part of our field even if she’s no longer part of the park district. Dre took a different position within Three Rivers. She finished out the summer at Lowry and then transferred to Coon Rapids Damn (becoming Mississippi Gateway Park) where she is focused on outreach to schools and working with the local community. What all this means is that we recently had two big full-time positions to fill and we’re excited to announce some familiar faces have taken their places.

First up is Elise Bushard. Elise has been with the park district for 29 years but had reduced her hours away from full-time for many years while she had young kids at home. With her kids growing up and going off to college, Elise was excited to get back to working as a naturalist full-time at Lowry. Instead of being here three days a week, Elise is now full-time again and will be here five days a week. Elise enjoys working with young children, seniors and everyone in between. Her passions include wildflowers, bluebirds, prairies, trees, local history and nature photography. She has a biology degree from Bethel University in St. Paul and is the one who has made most of Lowry’s Halloween costumes.

The second position was filled by Lauren Kitrell. She was most recently our summer-fall seasonal so we had the pleasure of running her though what essentially ended up being a six month interview process. Lauren impressed us all with her hard work, creativity and professionalism. She has previously worked at Springbrook Nature Center, Como Zoo, Wolf Ridge Environmental Learning Center, the Minnesota Historical Society and Three River’s Baker Near Wilderness Settlement. Lauren had taken over the running of the Kits and Cubs preschool program in the summer and she has pages of ideas for the future of that program. She’ll also be taking over as the staff lead on our reptiles and amphibians.

Finally, Joe Aliotto will be joining the staff in mid-December. Joe comes to Lowry with a very unique pairing of skills and experiences in graphic design and marketing strategies along with naturalist/outdoor education work. He began his career strictly as a graphic designer but after going on a 5 month hike over the complete Appalachian Trail he decided to make a career change to align more with his passion and interest in getting people interested and active in the outdoors. Since that time he has gotten his EE certification at Hamline and worked at RNC, ORS and Wilderness Inquiry on seasonal basis while also continuing to consult with General Mills developing marketing content and strategies. He also is a skilled wildlife photographer and ACA certified canoe instructor.

Polar Bear Picnic is now Polar Party! Saturday, February 1

Different name, same great event. To alleviate confusion over why there isn’t a polar bear or people eating at picnic tables, we have changed the name of the Polar Bear Picnic to the Polar Party. The event will still include all of your favorites: kicksledding, ice mini golf, the quinzhee, snowshoeing, sledding hill, medallion hunts and ice bowling. If you are interested in helping out we’d love to have you be a part of our second longest running annual event. More details on the next page about this event on February 1. Keep your eyes out for an announcement with regards to online signup being open. Till then, think snow!
Volunteer Opportunities

To sign up for volunteer opportunities, call 763-694-7650 or email LowryNC@ThreeRiversParks.org

WALK WHEN THE MOON IS FULL
Saturday, Jan 11 6:30—8pm
• Assist naturalists with program by checking people in as they arrive and assisting on the walk.

EMBRACE THE OUTDOORS IN THE NEW YEAR
Wednesday, Jan 1 2-4 pm
• Help monitor fire and kicksled fleet

POLAR BEAR PICNIC EVENT
Saturday, Feb. 1, 11:30—4:30pm
Don’t let winter get you down, come outside and play!
• Check In and Greeters
• Raptors
• Snowshoes, Kicksleds, Snowsnakes, and Ice Golf
• Quinzhee and Sledding Hill Monitors
• Hot Chocolate, Bonfire, and Preschool activity stations and Craft attendants

SNOWSHOE HIKE
Saturday, Feb 8 10a-12p
• Help participants with ice fishing

KICKSLEDS AND SNOWSNAKES
Sunday, Feb 9 1-3pm
• Help participants with kicksleds

PASSPORT TO LOWRY
Sunday, Feb 23 12:30-2:30 pm
• Help participants with winter activity stations

LAURA’S ADVENTURES:
Sugar and Snow
Saturday, February 29 2:30-4:30pm
Saturday, March 7 12:30-2:30pm
• Help participants with baking, tapping a tree and craft project

FREE PLAY SNOW DAY
Saturday, Feb 29 9-12:30 or 12:30-4:30 shift
• Help participants with snowshoes on this day of free rentals

MAPLE SYRUP FESTIVAL
Be a part of the sweetest spring tradition.
March 14, 1-4:30 pm
• Tree tapping station (1-2)
• Evaporator/fire tending (1-2)
• Greeting guests (1)
• Craft station (1-2)

NATURE CENTER HOSTS NEEDED!
Saturdays and Sundays in Winter
9-12:30 Saturdays
12:30-4 Saturdays and Sundays.
Call or email to inquire or see at: https://www.signupgenius.com/go/4090e4aa9ac2aaafa7-winter1
• Help distribute rental snowshoes, give brief instruction to snowshoers, unlock and manage kicksled fleet and tend lobby fires.

MARK YOUR CALENDAR!
ROCK HUNT—Fri, April 10 and Sat April 11.
Stay tuned for sign up info.

SAVE THE DATE!!
Volunteer Appreciation Event
Thursday, Feb. 20, 2020
At 6:30pm at Lowry Nature Center
Save the date!
More details to follow!
Winter Phenology

DECEMBER
- The moon is full on December 11th.
- White-tailed deer begin to shed their antlers. Usually only the males will have antlers. Occasionally a female can have antlers, but it is rare.
- Early December, the last of the migrating waterfowl such as snow geese journey south.

JANUARY
- January 29—Great horned owls begin nesting in January or February. They usually lay their eggs in abandoned nests of squirrels, hawks or crows but sometimes nest on cliff ledges or in hollow trees. Female owls lay one to five eggs, which hatch in 30 to 37 days.

FEBRUARY
- Black-capped Chickadees visit feeders at Lowry.
- Muskrats, living in their small dome shaped home made of cattails. Muskrats may be seen visiting their food push up to have a snack on vegetation they stored in summer and fall.
- Ice begins to melt on area lakes.
- Sap may begin to flow at the end of the month in maples trees.