

The Calm Before The Storm... by Cindy Williams

Spring is just around the corner, which means getting geared up for all those adorable babies needing lots of help. The winter lull is coming to an end. But before we get caught up in the hundreds of babies about to cross our threshold let's take a look at two babies that have been staying with us over the winter – and growing bigger by the week.

Even those of us who stop on the road to help a turtle across have to think twice about snatching up a Snapping Turtle. Its species name gives you one clue why – *serpentina* or "snake-like", so named because of its long, mobile neck and ferocious nature. And don't count on it recoiling into its shell to hide from the big, scary human. The Snapper carries its shell like a shield and can't retract into it, so it probably figures the best defense is a good offense. It will be more than happy to give you a sharp bite if you let it!

Our two little cuties came to us from a pet shop in Independence. Someone left them at the pet shop and they brought them to us for proper care and release. They weighed 11 and 20 grams when they came to us in late November (by comparison a half dollar weighs a little over 11 grams). It took a few days for the little guys (or gals) to figure out what real food looks like, but they soon started munching on mealworms and small pieces of fish, chicken and meat – soon they graduated to earthworms and crickets as well. A few months later they are already starting to look like the fierce predators they will become. They are well on their way to their final adult weight of 4.5 – 16 kilograms (1 kilogram = 1000 grams) so they will gain anywhere from 400 to 1600 times their initial weight. The average weight is about 6 kilograms, or 13 pounds. They continue to grow as they age and males are larger than females, so any you see in excess of 10 kilograms, or 22 pounds, are likely to be older males. The largest wild specimen caught weighed in at 34 kilograms, or 75 pounds!

Snapping Turtles are quite common throughout North America. They make their homes in ponds and streams. They eat pretty much anything they can catch including fish, frogs, other reptiles and even small birds and mammals but they will also eat plants. Once they reach maturity (12 – 20 years, longer in the north than the south) they have few natural predators. Like all turtles, Snappers are long lived. One study in Canada suggests a maximum age of over 100 years!

Another creature with a fierce reputation (much less well-deserved than the Snapping Turtle) that is quite common in our area is the Virginia Opossum. These guys are much

maligned but provide essential services that are often overlooked because of their, shall we say, questionable appearance. I think they are cute but most people don't share that opinion. Opossums are really not much of a threat to anything other than another Opossum, as evidenced by our current resident at the Center. Normal weights for males are 0.8 to 6.4 kilograms (1.7 to 14 pounds – much lighter than your average Snapper), and our big guy came in weighing 6.18 kilograms. He is one huge Opossum! But believe it or not, he found his way to us because he tangled with another Opossum that,



according to witnesses, was bigger than him! Apparently Kansas City grows them pretty big.



And apparently, its breeding season and the males are restless. We currently have two other adult male Opossums who are recovering from injuries, and neither of them weigh even half what this big guy weighs. And even though they are usually pretty laid back these guys have attitude this time of year.

Opossums are beneficial for several reasons. First of all, they eat dead stuff. I think we can all agree that's a good thing! And they eat rotten fruits and vegetables – thanks again! But they also eat ticks – lots and lots of ticks. And we all know that ticks spread Lyme disease. Ergo, Virginia Opossums help control disease. And the poor Opossum is really quite misunderstood. He could deliver quite a bite – he does, after all, have the most teeth of any North American mammal (50). But that's usually his last line of defense. His favorite trick when confronted is to hiss and drool and look really scary. That generally works pretty well for us humans at least. Of course we all know that the other arrow in his quiver is to pretend to be dead. When this happens, his heart rate lowers and he emits a smelly discharge from his anus to discourage anyone who might still be interested in a dead Opossum (he can play dead for up to 6 hours). Perhaps that's not the best way to advocate for the poor little fellow, but all that is to say he's really not vicious and would frankly just like to stay away from trouble. Maybe it's better to remind you that Opossums are marsupials, not rodents, and in fact the only North American marsupial. That means he's more closely related to a Kangaroo than a Rat. Our big guy will get his wound treated (you can see the wound on his right shoulder in the picture), get antibiotics and hopefully return to the wild no worse for the wear and make lots of babies. They are quite welcome in my yard any time.

Another injured creature currently under our care IS a member of the rodent family. Have you ever seen a critter off the side of the road and wondered if you just saw a Beaver? Or maybe you saw a Beaver-like form swimming in a nearby pond. What you probably saw was a Muskrat, very Beaver-like to the casual observer but smaller and without the large flat tail (although they do have a slightly vertically flattened one). Our cute little guy came in from Independence after having been hit by a car. He was pretty banged up – fractured top incisors, bloody gums and a bloody nose – and had a hard time eating solid foods. He's on a nice mush diet with pain medication and antibiotics and is now enjoying swim time. He'll stay with us until he heals and his teeth regrow.



Muskrats are found throughout Canada and the United States, as well as northern Mexico. They are semiaquatic animals that are found around wet areas such as lakes, ponds, rivers and other wetlands. They are great swimmers (they can stay underwater for up to 17 minutes) and usually create nests by burrowing into the ground at the side of a body of water. In marshes they create "push-ups", mounds made up of vegetation and mud, and in the winter during harsh times they might nibble on their push-ups for nutrition. Their diets consist primarily of vegetation, but they may eat small animals such as fish, frogs or crayfish. In fact they eat so many plants that they may change the makeup of plant life in a specific area.

Turtles, Opossums and Musk rats – animals with not much in common but the fact that they ran into a little bad luck and got some good help from some nice folks. Hopefully as the weather gets warmer we can bid a fond farewell to these guests and make room for the next round animals that need our help.