

Pinned, Poled Possum

Better to agitate a possum than eat one, right?
- A Possum Trotter

My participation with the possum is limited to be sure. Oh, I did have a one-time opportunity to compete in a possum trot; yes, a possum trot where each team - human with possum...and a pole - line-up on a make-shift track and race for the finish line. Besides crossing the line, the objective is to keep the possum moving forward with a little prod to the trot; or, if necessary, to use the pole for defensive measures. Yes, the possum can seem vicious - but who wouldn't if abducted from its habitat, caged or sacked in transit, and set-out in a pin for the prodding and pushing of an amateur. Better to agitate a possum than eat one, right?



"Playing Possum" is a common expression of these parts and has to do with the temporary paralysis of the possum as a defense mechanism. Just as the possum appears to be dead, *playing possum* may imply an act of equal effort or effect. In my recollection of the expression, such effort is often acted-out by boys and is subject to repetition if the effect is concern and consternation on the part of parent or pal; but once the realization surfaces, *playing possum* is reduced to amateur acting...at least for the boy. Whether a possum or simply *playing possum*, the general consensus of the audience seems to be contempt for the one because it looks like a big rat, and for the other because he is acting like one.

To be fair however, the possum is not unanimously undesirable - as some folks find them entertaining to hunt and even appetizing to eat. Among this

following is one famous storyteller to these parts, Jerry Clower. Born and bred in the deep-south amongst these types of critters, Jerry was not simply reciting the handed-down version of these tales; he was the *Real McCoy* when it comes to possum hunt-en and all sundry of possum and critter traits. From the names (and distinctive barks) of his and the Ledbetter's dogs to the fanciful feet of John Eubanks (a professional tree-climber), these tales are convincing of possum prowess and pedigree. For Jerry, and those like him, hunting possum (raccoon or otherwise) was not just a sport but a science and, at times, a downright necessity.

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In the fashion of one of his tales, a second participation with a possum involved my beagle, Molly: while on a walk one night, Molly treed a possum; and for a *spell*, she circled the tree with the customary baying, while the possum sat perched on a long-hanging tree limb. Watching this country concert, I was amazed at both determined action of the beagle and the apparent ambivalence of the possum - as it waited without much of a hiss or slobber as had been my earlier account as the possum trotter. Perhaps this possum of North Alabama was of different temperament than my earlier recollection from South Alabama - but I think that there may be more to than geographic origin or location.

In the observance of the possum, both alive and dead, is some attention to differing color of coat. Some seem all gray while others are a mix of darker shades - a difference which may or may not be associated with age. Regardless of color however, is the detestable appearance and odd features of this animal that bears every description of rodent from the shape of its head to the tip of its prehensile tail. Is it any wonder that the headlight flash of this varmint causes even the unknowing and unprepared urbanite to veer his Uniroyals toward - rather than away - from the passing possum?

In my limited experience with such critters, the possum is by far the most disregarded or disrespected by appearance - but then, I have not had much contact with critters. On a few camping trips, raccoons have made their rounds; but with their ingenuity and industry, who could scorn them for their foraging. A recent and rare encounter with a beaver left me with nothing but the up most respect for these engineers of the lake and stream.

Squirrels and chipmunks are well- acclimated and adjusted to the parks and yards of us human folk. The otters and such - while lacking the diligence and determination of the beaver - are playful and

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somewhat acrobatic as a sort of hairy, freshwater porpoise. Again, my contact has been limited; without any recollection of the skunk (except the pungent order now and then), the porcupine and the large rats that surface from the court house or a similar judicial forum.

One exception to this limited contact has been the recent arrival of the armadillo to this area. Appearing in silhouette somewhat like a possum, this reptilian rodent is armor plated with an attitude. Until a few years ago, my exposure and experience had been as boy living in North Florida: a friend and I would occasionally cross a band of these brush-crawlers, unleash the awesome firepower of a Daisy, and watch the band prod on by impervious to the BB. Not the expressed outcome for a former instructor however; as a Marine, the major seemed to be engaged in a more concentrated campaign in retaliation for the underground demolition of his front yard. Armed with firepower far outmatching a BB gun, he would execute a series of suburban sorties that could have been the "addendum on armadillos in *The Art of War*. Such descriptions of gorilla tactics included dismemberment of the fallen fray as the usual course for warding-off the remaining; yet even with his success, the armadillo probably had a better chance in survival rooting out his yard than crossing a highway.

I can't imagine what the armadillo would sound like if it could talk, but the possum would probably have a squeaky, raspy voice - as though it had a soar throat or was having to contend with nasal congestion. Having no recollection of an animated possum - such as in a Disney movie or the like - leaves the imagination to accept the aforementioned hissing, saliva, and general demeanor as the basis for this voice. Words - however sounded - would be limited to a few phrases that might include: "just leave me alone...I only want something - anything - to eat; "please call-off your barking dog...I only want something...to eat; and finally, " " - when playing possum.

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Like all of God's creatures - including the human kind - the possum has a place. If I recall, one of my children may have had a stuffed-animal possum one time - which may have been one of a collector series or something. Where the stuffed-animal might be is beyond me - as is the reason why God created the possum. But for those who have hunted, eaten and otherwise found a purpose, the possum is a portion for the table or at least for play.