



Tales from a  
**Sisters Naturalist**  
by Jim Anderson

**Opossums and cats in the news**

The other day an email arrived in my in-box containing a message from a Sisters resident who was wondering about opossums in Sisters. She wrote: "My horse is showing signs of EPM but there aren't opossums in Central Oregon. The EPM is contracted through eating opossum poop, and I get my hay from a grower in Sisters."

EPM, Equine Protozoal Myeloencephalitis, is a disease that affects the central nervous system of horses. It was first discovered in the 1960s, and considered rare, though recently, an increasing number of cases have been reported.

Early research in the Southeast U.S. identified the opossum as a host of the disease. However since that time it has been learned that all wildlife can be a host

and vector, but it's spread mostly by outdoor cats. As an example, horses in the Rocky Mountains have been found with EPM where no opossum has ever lived — but just about everyone has a "barn cat." And here it is in Sisters, where no opossum have ever lived either...

The villain is literally underfoot, rubbing on the horse-owners boots. Outdoor cats are more trouble than they're worth, and they spread some very nasty diseases in their poop.

So much for that; let's talk about opossums, the only native marsupial living in the wilds of North America. They are confined to the east and southeastern latitudes, and transplanted to the humid Northwest. When I worked with OMSI in Portland and lived in Beaverton, opossums became part of my life, being underfoot (literally) 24/7.

I had a U-pick farm in Beaverton and had to deal with opossums getting into my pickling cucumbers and cornfields. They also made themselves at home with the food I gave my goats, geese, and chickens. I began wondering what they did for a living in and around Portland.

To help find out I placed a small, numbered plastic tag in the ear of every possum I came into contact with and released them. People called

me with opossums in just about every kind of human contact you can think of, so to increase those contacts I asked the Beaverton police department to give me all their opossum calls, which they were delighted to do.

The best one happened one night when the duty officer asked me to come to a home in downtown Beaverton where a resident was complaining about "burglars" in his home.

I got there just in time to hear the home-owner say, "I tell ya' I can hear them in the walls trying to get in my house!" The officer in charge looked at me and I asked the fellow where he could hear them. He marched us off to a hallway and kicked the wall with his foot, "Right here!" he said.

I dropped to my knees (it was a lot easier back then) and took out my stethoscope and listened to the wall. He was right, I could hear all kinds of bustling behind the sheetrock. "Yep," I said, "I can hear 'em too." And with that the guy took his jiggle-saw and proceeded to cut out a suitcase-sized piece of the sheetrock.

Two things happened almost simultaneously as he cut the hole in the sheetrock: first, a huge mass of plastic bags came tumbling out of the hole, and at the same moment

one of the officers investigating the backyard shouted, "Hey, inside the house, you gotta come and see this!"

We all hurried to where the officer was standing, and in the light of his torch we could see 40 or more opossums headed right for a bunch of Volvo cars and station wagons filling the backyard. That's when we discovered the guy was not only a Volvo rebuilder, he was also operating a thriving opossum breeding colony that were about to move in with him. There were opossums in every car — sometimes up to three or four; under the seats, behind the dashboards, in the trunks, and one that was living in a glove compartment.

The most astonishing thing about all this was the presence of hundreds upon hundreds of plastic bags in each opossum hidey-hole. That mystery was quickly solved when one of the officers called out, "Look at this!" His light was following a couple of opossum scooting across the yard carrying a bunch of plastic bags with their prehensile tails.

I had a hunch plastic bags were some kind of insulation opossums used to keep their ears from freezing in the



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

An opossum squatter living in the glove box of an old Volvo.

cold, wet winter nights of the Northwest.

And yesterday I read an interesting scientific paper on how opossums can be effective in controlling tick populations. Seems opossums naturally go about collecting ticks all over their warm bodies as hosts for the tiny arachnids, they then gobble them up and go out of their way to slurp more up as they stumble and fumble through the underbrush of their native countryside.

That said, PLEASE all you wonderful people, don't bring any opossums into Sisters Country to help kill off our ticks — and — if you have a pet cat at home, please keep it inside and teach it to poop in the toilet.

**Outlaw Booster Club Inaugural  
Outlaw Hall of Fame  
Dinner & Induction Ceremony**

**June 25, 2015**

**Social at FivePine 5:30 p.m.  
Dinner & Ceremony 6:30 p.m.**

**2015 Inductees:**

- Sisters High School Class Of 1993**
- Dr. Susan Hyde (SHS '96)**
- Mr. Bob Macauley (SHS 1992 – 2011)**
- Mr. Stan Williams (SHS '58)**
- 1996 Volleyball HS State Champions**
- Mr. Ron Phillips (SHS '58)**
- Sisters Starry Nights**
- Mr. AJ Demaris (SHS '62)**
- Dr. Leonard Langeliers (SHS '57)**
- Mr. Jon Justin (SHS '98)**
- Surprise Inductee**

**19th Annual Outlaw Open  
at Aspen Lakes**

**June 26, 2015 at 1 p.m.  
Scramble Golf & Catered Barbecue**

All Proceeds Benefit All Sisters Schools' Co-Curricular Activities.

[www.shshalloffame.org](http://www.shshalloffame.org) • 541-617-0707

Outlaw Booster Club is a 501(c)(3) organization.

