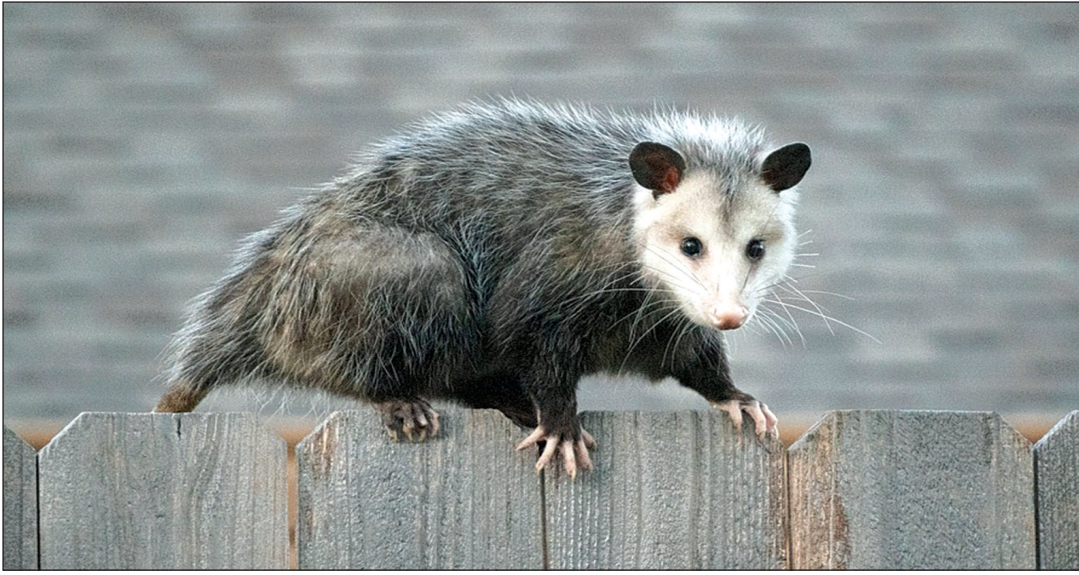


Spotlight on Middlebury



A possum demonstrates its agility walking along a suburban fence. These American marsupials, remarkable for many reasons, are common in the Middlebury area, including in the author's backyard. (Image by G. Halpin from Pixabay)

# Meet our only marsupial

By JANINE SULLIVAN-WILEY

You may never have seen it, but there is a good chance that during the dark of night, a small not terribly cute little critter has wandered through your yard. This most curious of creatures, the opossum – or possum – or *Didelphis virginianus*, is special in many ways.

It is the only marsupial – a mammal that gives birth to premature, undeveloped young that continue developing inside a pouch on the mother's belly – found in North America north of Mexico. It also is unique in its ancient lineage: possums have been around for about 70 million years and are one of the planet's oldest mammal species. According to Connecticut's DEEP, they were not present in Connecticut before the early 1900s but, due to their adaptability, have gradually been expanding their range northwards and are now found throughout New England.

No one will submit them to a "cutest animal" contest with their long, coarse, grayish-

white coats, long hairless scaly tail, pointy snout, prominent thin ears and short legs. Their unprepossessing appearance is accented by their extraordinary dentition: they have 50 sharp teeth, more than any other land animal in North America. (Snails have thousands of teeth, but that doesn't seem like a fair comparison.) Those teeth are bundled in a small package 15 - 20 inches in length not counting the 9 - 20 inch prehensile tail and weighing from four to 12 pounds. I suspect the one we often see on our trail camera in the backyard is at the heavier end of the spectrum as it waddles across the yard many nights.

While the possum won't earn prizes in the looks category, it could certainly win in the "interesting" category. There is that prehensile (capable of grasping) tail, for example. While adult possums can't hang from their tails like they do in cartoons, their tails are still quite useful. They provide support while climbing and they can carry nesting material

like sticks, leaves and hay back to their dens.

Then there is the marsupial part. They give birth to an average of nine very tiny babies (about the size of a navy bean) that are blind when first born and crawl their way a few inches to the mother's pouch. There they attach to the nipples where they remain for about 80 days until weaned. Once they leave the pouch, they may be seen riding around on the female's back. (I'm still hoping to catch that on the trail camera someday.) While they do thrive in our habitat, during severe winters their ears and tails are vulnerable to frostbite.

Also interesting is their response to scary things (like predators or us). When frightened, they will first seek cover. If that doesn't work, they bare their 50 sharp teeth and hiss or growl. If that doesn't work, a remarkable involuntary response kicks in: they fall over, immobile, teeth pulled into a grimace, often emitting a foul odor, looking quite dead. This

See **Marsupial ... Page 5**

# People help Kenyan villagers

By ELAINE STROBEL

**Introduction:** In March 2026, 13 people from across the U.S. traveled to a remote village in Kenya with Global Village Ministries ([www.globalvillageministries.org](http://www.globalvillageministries.org)) bringing with them much needed items for the village school and providing dental and health care to as many as they could during their stay. Middlebury resident Elaine Strobel was part of that group. At our request, she wrote about the trip so we could learn what life is like in the Maasai region of Africa. Her three-part story will appear in May, June and July. The entire essay will be posted online at [Bee-news.com](http://Bee-news.com).

While there, Strobel discovered an urgent need for eyeglasses, and she is asking for donations of used eyeglasses, particularly dark glasses. All glasses are appreciated. They can be dropped off Monday through Friday from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m. at the Middlebury Senior Center in Shepardson Community Center at 1172 Whittemore Road in Middlebury.

**Part 1 of 3. The land and the people** – The flight to Nairobi, Kenya, took 15 hours. We were a 13-member team from across the United States on a medical and educational mission for Global Village Ministries. As we began our final descent, the flight attendant announced, "Plastic bags are not allowed to enter the country." I didn't think I'd heard correctly. Five minutes later, he repeated, "Plastic bags are not allowed to enter the country." I don't believe anyone took the announcement seriously. After we landed, I learned that Kenya has difficulty disposing of plastic bags and water bottles and that the government is trying to limit their impact by restricting their use. The policy is working in certain areas of the country.

We arrived around 11:30 p.m., and our group cleared



Women of the Maasai tribe chat with each other. Members of Caroline's village, they were waiting for the dental clinic to open. (Elaine Strobel photo)

customs with 23 large bags without issue. As we exited the airport, our luggage was briefly X-rayed, and officers asked what was inside. We politely explained that we were there on a medical and educational mission, bringing supplies for a clinic and a school. Next, officials told us we had to pay a tariff to bring the materials into the country. They demanded \$3000 USD from our group to leave the airport. Fortunately, our contact in Nairobi, Faith, arrived just in time and negotiated the fee down to \$500 USD. We paid the tax and exited the airport.

The next day, we took a six-hour jeep ride to the Maasai region – the part of the country where we would be working. The jeep traveled along two-lane roads. There are no interstate highways like those in the United States and Europe. Outside Nairobi, there are no stoplights, only rotaries. When vehicles enter towns on straight roads, speed bumps slow traffic. If they want you to stop before entering a town, spikes are spread across half the road so only one car can pass at a time. Many of the roads and almost all the railroads were built by the Chinese government. The roads had many potholes because thin layers of asphalt were used in construction. The

Kenyan government owes money to China for its work and is struggling to repay the debt. As a result, the Chinese are asking for payment in Kenya's natural resources.

The scenery on our drive to the Maasai region reminded me of the movie "The Lion King." In the opening song, "The Circle of Life," all the animals gather to pay tribute to Simba. The landscape looks just like that. I saw many zebras, giraffes, warthogs, elephants, and rhinos. Kenya is exceptionally beautiful. Conservancies are used to protect wildebeest and other species from poaching and migration disruptions. They are visible throughout Kenya. Some are owned and operated by wealthy local landowners, while others are managed by the government and funded internationally. The Maasai Mara Conservancy is famous for its abundant and diverse wildlife and cultural heritage. There are two conservancies in the region. I was informed that locals now do most of the poaching.

Kenya has many safari resorts. Tourists pay about \$10,000 USD per person per week for safaris in these conservancies. It's common for travelers to spend an entire

See **Helping Kenya ... Page 7**

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Dear Residents and Neighbors,

My name is Brian Shaban. I am a husband, father, veteran, career firefighter and a Deputy Fire Chief in town. I was privileged to be appointed to fill the open seat on the Board of Selectmen by the electors. During my time in office I have listened to residents and voted for greater public input on planning, open space, and conservation. I have fought for a lower mill rate and supported family programs, including a children's librarian.

Middlebury deserves balanced leadership that serves with integrity. On June 23, a special election gives every resident the opportunity to be heard.

I'm writing to remind you of this important date and to stress one key fact: if I lose, Middlebury will have no Republican representation on the Board of Selectmen. My continued presence on the Board will help to ensure a truly balanced Board that represents all the residents of our town and one that respects taxpayers, ends divisiveness, supports public safety, and strengthens programs for our kids. We have a great town. Together, let's make Middlebury better. I will be available at public events around town — please come say hello. I humbly ask for your vote on June 23 at Shepardson Community Center.

Middlebury is better with Brian.

Paid for by: Selectman Brian Shaban Committee, David Shaban, Treasurer. Approved by: Brian Shaban.