That is why

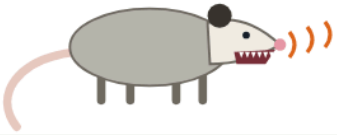
What happens inside an opossum that plays dead?

A reflex, a costume and a slow heart: the science behind the fake death.

A The trigger: three steps

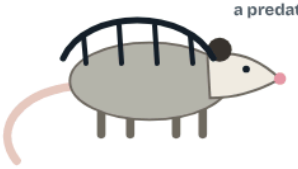
1 The bluff

It hisses and bares its 50 teeth.



2 Grabbed and held

Strong touch and pressure trip a reflex, tonic immobility. It is involuntary.

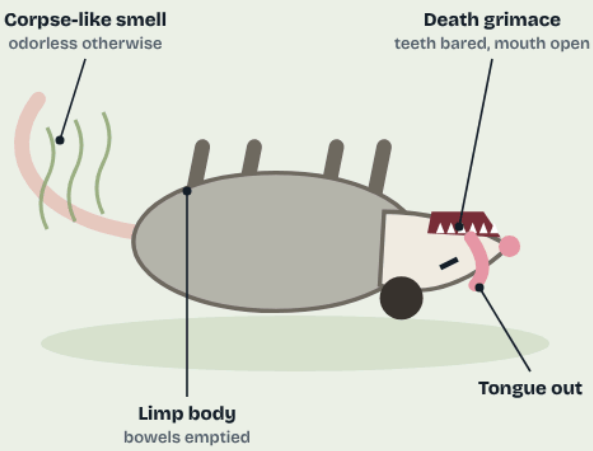


3 Down it goes

It goes limp and falls over.



B The costume of a corpse



How long the act lasts

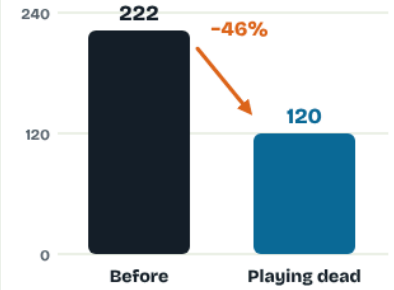


A predator may lose interest and leave it alone.

C Inside: a slower heart

Heart rate (beats per minute)

4 common opossums, 1985



When the dog came back, the heart slowed again: still aware.

Other fakers, record times

Antlion larvae — 61 min

Darwin's beetle — 23 min

Ducks caught by foxes go limp too, and some escape. The hognose snake rolls over and lies still.

Playing dead is a gamble: an experienced predator can simply keep biting.

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Diagram: https://thatiswhy.com/diagrams/why-opossums-play-dead/ · Full guide: https://thatiswhy.com/why-do-opossums-play-dead/