

Raccoon

Living in Harmony with Your Wild Neighbors



WHAT do you get when you combine intelligence, manual dexterity, and a nocturnal lifestyle? Well, in the case of the raccoon, you have an animal well-suited to living near people.

Raccoons are one of the most charismatic species of animals found in North America. Given their superb ability to adapt to, and even exploit, changing environmental conditions, it's not too surprising that raccoons are now common residents in cities, towns, and suburbs.

Technically, raccoons are carnivores. Their diet, however, is more accurately described as omnivorous. They readily consume both animal and plant matter, and their diet varies with locality, season, and availability.

In addition to eating wild foods, raccoons aren't averse to raiding gardens, garbage cans, bird feeders, fish ponds—even kitchen cabinets. Raccoons have been known to use door knobs, so cabinet doors are hardly a challenge. And a pet door is an open invitation.

Chimneys, porches, and attics are all attractive denning sites from the raccoon perspective. Add readily accessible trash cans, or pet food and water bowls, and you've got the raccoon equivalent of a Hilton.

Is it any wonder that conflicts arise between raccoons and their human neighbors? Luckily for both, a little patience and understanding can go a long way toward resolving any problems.

Humane methods of conflict prevention and resolution have proven to be less costly and less stressful than removal of a resident animal for both wildlife and homeowners. While removal may seem like a solution, it usually only creates an enticing vacancy for another animal in search of a ready-made home.

People can live in harmony with wildlife—you just have to know your wild neighbors!

Raccoon Facts— GEE WHIZ

The word “raccoon” is derived from *arakun*, an Algonquin word meaning “he scratches with his hands.”

Raccoons' varied vocal repertoire includes purrs, whimpers, snarls, growls, hisses, screams, and whinnies.

Raccoons walk flat-footed, like elephants, bears, and humans.

Raccoons can descend a tree headfirst—by rotating the hind feet 180 degrees.

A raccoon hand has ten times as many nerve endings as a human hand.

Raccoons are found throughout most of North and Central America (see map).



Vital Statistics

Description: Highly variable, with an easily recognizable black facial mask and ringed tail.

Habitat: Varied, including seashores, prairies, farmland, wooded areas, and suburban and urban areas.

Diet: Omnivorous

Adult Length: 2 to 4 ft. (600 to 1,200 mm) from nose to tail tip.

Adult Weight: 5 to 40 lbs. (2 to 18 kg)

Activity: Generally, but not strictly, nocturnal.

Birthing Season: From March to May; however, in southern U.S., may occur year-round.

Age When Independent: Between 6 and 12 months.



Raccoon

Seasonal Considerations

An understanding of the yearly activities of raccoons will help with damage identification and conflict prevention planning.

SPRING: Raccoon cubs are born from early spring through early summer, so homeowners should be very careful when trying to exclude raccoons from buildings at these times. Cubs stay at the den site for about two months, and during this time the mother will leave each day to find food. If the mother is locked out with the cubs inside, she will do considerable damage trying to reach them. If she is trapped and removed at this time, the cubs will starve to death. This is the time for homeowners to observe where the mother is entering the building and begin making plans for repairs once the young have left to accompany her on nightly excursions.

SUMMER: Attics often become too hot for comfort, so raccoons naturally begin to seek shelter under decks and patios, or in wooded areas.

FALL: Raccoons begin to seek shelter and extra food. Now is the time to inspect your home and make any repairs, checking first to make sure that animals have not moved inside. The harassment techniques described in this fact sheet often work especially well during this time of year.

WINTER: Severe weather may cause raccoons to stay in their dens for a week or longer. Raccoons don't hibernate, but they do conserve energy by limiting activity. Exclusion efforts may cause animals to be trapped inside. Homes may be damaged as animals try to escape. Animals who cannot escape will die of starvation.

Damage Identification



BEFORE you begin taking steps to resolve a raccoon problem, you'll need to do a little detective work to make sure that the animal you're dealing with is really a raccoon. Raccoons are primarily nocturnal, so they usually begin their day as the sun is setting. Using the techniques described in this fact sheet, identify the likely entrance or entrances. Find a place, not too

close, where you can sit quietly and watch for the animal to leave.

If you're not able to observe the animal coming or going, tracks are one of the best ways to identify raccoon presence. Flour, cornstarch, and other nontoxic powders can be used to check for footprints on hard surfaces, such as sidewalks and roofing shingles.

Raccoons can be heard moving around in attics and chimneys at dusk

and just before sunrise. Tree squirrels will be active by day and quiet at night, while flying squirrels are nocturnal. Squirrels are considerably smaller than raccoons and their movements tend to be quick and light—they scurry. Raccoons sound more like Sumo wrestlers practicing.

If young cubs are present, you may hear chittering or purring sounds, especially when the mother returns to the den. These noises will become louder as the young animals grow and develop.

Raccoon signs can be confused at times with opossums and skunks. Skunks are burrowers rather than climbers, so they rarely den in attics and chimneys—and that signature scent is a real tip-off. Opossums are generally slower and more deliberate than raccoons.

Building Inspection and Damage Prevention

CAREFUL attention to prevention of wildlife conflicts is, of course, the simplest, most economical, and humane course of action. A periodic inspection of buildings will reveal potential entry sites. In the case of buildings with two or more stories, binoculars can help immeasurably.

Raccoons are good climbers, and they may gain access to roofs using overhanging branches, television towers, and downspouts. The entrance hole used by adult raccoons can be quite small. Pay particular attention to eaves, deteriorating boards, warped siding, loose shingles, and areas where the roof and house join.

Toilet areas (a.k.a. latrines) may be seen on roofs or in attics. It is important to avoid unprotected contact

with any fecal material found. Inside attics, check for insulation compacted into four-inch wide trails or gathered into a pile two to three feet in diameter.

Household Repairs

- Replace worn, curled, cracked, or missing shingles.
- Cover chimneys with approved chimney caps, available at hardware stores and from chimney maintenance professionals.
- Inspect and repair any attic openings with one-half inch, heavy-duty, rust-proof hardware cloth. Chicken wire isn't strong enough for exclusion purposes.
- Trim overhanging branches and remove unused TV towers.
- Remove leaves from roofs and gutters to prevent wood rot.



Homeowners should make arrangements to have professionals complete these repairs if they are uncomfortable with heights or if conditions on the roof are hazardous.

Problem Solving



YOUR first option is to wait things out—many problems resolve themselves within a few days or weeks. A second option is the use of harassment methods to encourage animals to leave. Both of these approaches require some patience, but results are long-term, whereas “quick fix” approaches inevitably require repetition.

- Place a battery-operated radio in the den area, tuned to a talk or rock station, and turn up the volume.
- Leave attic lights on.
- Tape a weak barrier, such as

newspaper or window screening, over the entrance to help you determine if the animal has left. Once you are *absolutely* certain that *all* the animals are gone, repairs and raccoon-proofing operations can begin. Remember that animals locked inside can cause a great deal of damage trying to get out. Those who are unsuccessful will suffer a cruel death from starvation and thirst.

Raccoons under Decks

Use harassment techniques until the animal leaves; then, secure the perimeter of the deck or patio with galvanized steel screen in an “L” shape to prevent digging under the barrier.

Raiding Garbage

Raccoons will return to a reliable source of garbage, so discourage this behavior by placing cans at the curb on the day of pick-up rather than the night before, and place cans inside a shed or garage in between pick-ups. Use containers with tight-fitting lids.

Gardens and Feeders

Raccoons are attracted to fruits, corn, birdseed, and suet. There are

commercially available repellents that can be used to deter raccoons, but the effect is temporary. Branches lower than three feet from the ground may need to be trimmed. Fruit trees and bird feeder poles can be protected with conical metal guards that keep the animals from climbing.

Raccoons in Chimneys

First, find out if the animal is denning or trapped. **Never smoke any animal out of a chimney.** In most chimneys, an adult raccoon can climb in or out at will, but young animals, squirrels, opossums, and some birds may not be able to leave on their own.

Assuming the animal can leave, harassment techniques can be used to encourage the raccoon to move along. After the animal has left, prevent further problems by installing an approved chimney cap.

Get help from a professional if the animal fails to leave or is loose inside the house. Call your local humane society or wildlife rehabilitation center for advice.

Injured or Orphaned Animals

WILDLIFE rehabilitation centers provide care for injured and orphaned wildlife until the animals can be released back to the wild. In most states, wildlife rehabilitation can be practiced only by someone with state and/or federal licenses.

Never try to capture or handle an injured, ill, or orphaned raccoon on your own. Raccoons of any age are capable of giving nasty bites or scratches. Adult raccoons are formidable animals, even when weakened by disease or injury. A wildlife rehabilitator or humane society

can advise you on the best course of action if you find an animal in distress. Always keep your own safety in mind.

Orphaned raccoons are particularly endearing, and the concept of raising a cub on your own, either with the idea of turning him loose or keeping him as a pet, can seem appealing. Raccoons make terrible pets, though. They are wild animals capable of biting, scratching, and destroying household items and property. **DO NOT** attempt to raise an orphaned raccoon.

Raccoon cubs, like all other infants, have unique nutritional requirements. Infant formulas available at pet stores may claim to be appropriate for all small mammals, but this is not true. Problems that result from an inappropriate diet, such as metabolic bone disease (also known as rickets), can debilitate an animal for life.

Unless behavioral and developmental requirements are addressed, a young raccoon may not be capable of surviving life in the wild. In addition, municipal ordinances often prohibit keeping a wild animal as a pet. Zoos and wildlife centers are rarely an option for unwanted, hand-raised raccoons. Only licensed wildlife rehabilitators can provide appropriate care for wild animals.

Ask your local humane society to recommend a wildlife rehabilitator in your area.



Consequences of Feeding

THE idea of offering food to raccoons can be tempting. But feeding raccoons can quickly get out of control. While one or two animals can be cute, a half dozen or more can begin to feel like an invasion. And if food is available, even food left in pet bowls, more creatures will certainly arrive.

Remember—you may be willing to put up with overturned garbage cans and barking dogs, but your neighbors might not be as tolerant. Large aggregations of raccoons can pose serious health risks.

Overcrowding increases the risk of disease transmission between these normally dispersed animals. As they become accustomed to the sights and sounds of humans, raccoons will begin to lose their natural fear—a risky proposition for any wild animal. Before long, what began as a kind-hearted gesture ends up endangering the very creatures you had intended to help.

Human Health Concerns

Raccoons are susceptible to a number of diseases, including canine distemper, parvo, pneumonia, tuberculosis, encephalitis, listeriosis, trichinosis, coccidiosis, and rabies. The following diseases pose the most serious health risk for humans and their pets.

Rabies

Raccoons are classified as a rabies vector species, along with foxes, skunks, and bats. In spite of all the concern and fear surrounding this disease, advances in public education, vaccination of pets, and post-exposure treatment have greatly reduced the risk to humans from this disease. There has never been a documented human death resulting from the raccoon strain of rabies.

Roundworm

Baylisascaris procyonis in raccoons is well-documented, and the parasite is a public health concern. The parasite is transmitted through the ingestion of eggs passed in feces, so the key to dealing with this problem is public awareness. Avoidance of raccoon latrines is imperative. Children should be prevented from playing in areas where raccoons have defecated. In addition, proper hygiene is crucial wherever raccoons have been kept, housed, or transported.

Leptospirosis

Raccoons are capable of carrying and transmitting this disease, but the incidence is so low as to be of concern only in people who routinely come into close contact with these animals, such as wildlife rehabilitators or animal control officers.

Distemper

This disease is similar to rabies and can also affect some pets. However, it does not pose a threat to humans. Contact your veterinarian to discuss any concerns, and make sure that your pets are vaccinated annually against this and other diseases. Keeping your pets indoors and/or not allowing them to roam freely will also help avoid this disease.

The HSUS provides fact sheets on a variety of topics. For additional information contact:

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