



Raccoons

(*Procyon lotor*)



Raccoons are one of the most recognizable furbearers in urban and suburban environments. They are widely distributed across North America, and can be found almost anywhere suitable habitats exist. Their ringed tail and masked face easily identifies them, and has also earned them the name “masked bandit.” Although they can be cute and cuddly looking, many people come to regard them as a nuisance when they eat crops, or tear apart garbage. Raccoons are an especially valuable furbearer species throughout the United States.

Description

The raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) is a mammal that belongs to the Procyonidae family. The word “raccoon” was translated into English from the native Powhatan term, *aroughcun*, recorded by Captain John Smith in the Virginia Colony. The word was written down as part of his list of Powhatan words. The term has also been identified as part of the Proto-Algonquian root, *ahrah-koon-em*, which means “one who rubs, scrubs and scratches with its hands.”

Adult raccoons are medium sized mammals that range from 18 to 28 inches in length. The tail is usually between 8 and 12 inches long, with rings of black and off-white encircling it. Adults usually weigh between 12 and 35 pounds. They have black markings around their eyes, and a long pointed snout. Raccoons are typically greyish brown in color, but can be quite variable.



Raccoon tracks are also relatively easy to distinguish. They will show a C-shaped palm area, and have five digits on both front and hind feet. At the end of each digit, a small dot will be seen. They have excellent dexterity and can manipulate latches and lids off of trash cans and other containers. There are thousands of nerve endings in their front paws and toes. Their feet also allow them to climb down a tree either backwards or face first.

Life History

Range/Habitat: Raccoons prefer wooded habitat adjacent to streams, ponds, or wetlands, but they have also become well adapted to living in agricultural and suburban areas. Raccoons range from the East Coast of the United States, all the way to the West Coast, but are absent from the area just east of the Rocky Mountains. They range south into Mexico, and north into Canada.

Studies of raccoons have shown population densities that range from 1 to 15 animals per acre. Densities are dependent on quality of habitat, including food availability. High population numbers in suburban and urban environments are due to readily available food sources. Captive raccoons have been known to live up to 14 years, but the average lifespan of wild raccoons is usually no longer than 10 to 12 years.

Behavior: Raccoons are nocturnal, but can be active during the day, particularly at dawn and dusk. Raccoons are also not true hibernators, but they may den up during extended cold periods. Hollow logs, trees, rock crevices, ground burrows, or barns and buildings can all be used for den sites.



Food Habits: Raccoons are omnivorous, which means they eat both plant material and meat. Their natural diet includes nuts, fruits, grains, insects, frogs, eggs, small mammals, fish and birds. They are a very opportunistic species and will also eat food such as birdseed, garbage, and pet food.

Reproduction: Offspring of the raccoon are born in mid to late spring, after a gestation period of 60 to 73 days. Between two and seven young are born in each litter, and one litter per year is born to each mating female. Females prefer tree cavities to give birth and raise their young. In the absence of tree cavities they will often use chimneys or buildings. Juvenile raccoons are unable to open their eyes during their first three weeks, and their ear canals are also closed for this period. Males do not take part in raising the young at all.



Damage Identification

As an opportunistic species, raccoons will commonly get into unsecured garbage containers left outdoors. They can also get into unsecured poultry coops, and may cause considerable damage to eggs and birds. Some characteristics of raccoon predation are the removal of the head and crop of the birds, chewed and eaten breast, and bits of flesh found near water sources. Raccoons are able to grasp with their front feet and will sometimes reach their paws through fencing to get at chicks. Eggs can be completely removed from the nest, or eaten on site.



Raccoons can cause substantial crop damage, particularly to newly ripened sweet corn. Corn stalks will usually show considerable damage, and can be completely knocked over. Individual ears may even be peeled back. Raccoons are particularly fond of apples, grapes, pears and other fruits. They can also damage bird feeders while trying to get to the seed.

Raccoons as Disease Carriers

Rabies is a viral disease of mammals. It is transmitted from the saliva of the infected animal by bites or scratches. First confirmed in Rhode Island in 1994, the rabies virus is now endemic and can be expected to occur in wild mammal populations throughout the state. Infected animals can exhibit a wide range of symptoms, from aggressiveness and rage, to aimless wandering, lethargy, weakness of the hind legs, and loss of awareness. Never attempt to capture or handle a raccoon or other wild mammal whether it looks sick, injured or healthy. Any contact between a raccoon or other wild mammal and a person should be reported to a physician immediately. Any contact between a domestic animal and wild mammal should be reported to your veterinarian and local animal control officer.

Baylisascaris procyonis, also known as “raccoon roundworm”, is a nematode found in the small intestines of raccoons. Not only is it a human health risk, but it can be harmful to other animals as well. The nematode’s eggs are shed in the raccoon’s feces. If ingested by another raccoon, the larvae migrate to the intestine and develop into adult worms. If ingested by humans, the larvae can spread throughout the body, including the central nervous

system, and attack various tissue such as the brain, eyes, heart or lungs, and cause severe or life-threatening health implications. Therefore, raccoons should not be fed or encouraged to feed on porches and their feces should not be allowed to accumulate in areas where people live or spend time. Removal of large amounts of raccoon feces should be done by professionals with appropriate safety equipment.

Canine distemper is a viral disease, which causes the animal to show respiratory distress, sneezing, coughing, or nasal discharge. Symptoms may resemble those of rabies, but can only be confirmed by laboratory testing. Canine distemper is not common in Rhode Island, and it is not transmittable to humans.

It is important to seek medical attention immediately if bitten or scratched by a raccoon, or any other wild animal. Also, be sure to call your local animal control officer when pets come in contact or suspected contact with a potentially infected raccoon or other wild animal. When humans come in contact with these animals, you should be sure to contact your Department of Health, and a Department of Environmental Management Enforcement officer. You could potentially avoid unnecessary rabies shots if the animal you came in contact with is caught and tests negative.



Regulatory Status



In Rhode Island, raccoons are classified as protected furbearers and Rhode Island state law (RIGL 20-16-2) allows a property owner to kill, by legal means, any furbearer (as defined in RIGL 20-16-1) that is killing or attempting to kill any livestock or domestic animals, destroying crops, creating a health hazard, or causing economic damage to their property. However, the law does not allow for the random taking of wildlife, for the taking of furbearers for their pelts outside the open season, or for killing of animals outside the boundaries of the property of the person with the problem. Also, it does not allow for unlawful methods of take such as poisons, snares, foothold traps, or discharge of firearms in violation of state or local ordinances. The law states that animals taken must be reported to the DEM within 24 hours.

The DEM does not recommend that property owners attempt to live trap nuisance furbearers unless they are prepared and willing to euthanize the offending animal. State regulations prohibit the live capture and translocation of furbearers. Captured furbearers can only legally be released on the property on which they were captured. For further information about hunting and trapping rules and regulations, see the Rhode Island Hunting Trapping Abstracts, or contact the Great Swamp Field Office at DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov or at (401) 789-0281.

Damage Prevention

Tightly sealed doors and windows on chicken coops can keep raccoons from gaining access into the buildings. Tight meshed hardware cloth can also help to keep raccoons from getting into spaces or holes. However, it is important to remember that raccoons are great climbers, so the tops of cages or pens must be secure as well as the sides. Remove any over-hanging limbs so the raccoons will not be able to access rooftops and chimneys as easily. In crop fields, an electric fence can be used to keep raccoons at bay. The fence should have one wire placed approximately 6 inches off the ground, with a second wire being placed 10-12 inches off the ground. The fence can be turned on at dusk, and then off again in the morning. Remember to not leave any branches hanging over the fence. For smaller scale problems, individual ears of corn, or other vegetables and fruits can be wrapped in filament tape at night. This filament tape should be strong enough so that raccoons will not be able to tear though it.



Household garbage should be stored in plastic or metal containers with tight fitting lids. These containers should be fastened or secured to racks or poles, so that raccoons will not be able to tip them over. A weight placed on the lid can also help to keep raccoons from getting into the containers. Freezing extremely odorous garbage before putting it on the curbside can drastically cut back its smell as well.

Pet food can be a prime target for raccoons. Be sure to feed pets indoors whenever possible. Also, feed pets only as much as they will eat. Left-over food should be removed.



When raccoons are getting into chimneys, a commercial cap specially designed to deter wildlife can be used. Be sure to make sure there are no animals left in the chimney before capping it. A diagram of what these chimney caps should entail can be obtained from the Great Swamp Fish and Wildlife Field Office.

Scare tactics, such as lights, radios, scarecrows, aluminum pie plates, or cloth streamers can be used to deter raccoons. However, these methods are usually only temporary fixes to the problem. For more suggestions visit www.wildlifehelp.org, a collaborative online resource by government and non-profit wildlife agencies.

For more information regarding trapping regulations and proper licensing procedures, contact The Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife Office, Great Swamp Field Headquarters. Email: DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov, Phone number: (401) 789-0281 or the Department of Health at (401) 222-2577.

Selected References

Holmgren, Virginia C. (1990). *Raccoons: In Folklore, History & Today's Backyards*. Capra Pres. p. 157.
Whitaker, J. and H. William. 1998. Mammals of the Eastern United States. 3rd ed. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press

Raccoon photographs courtesy of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

It is the policy of the Department of Environmental Management to offer its services and accommodations to all orderly persons, and, as required, to all properly licensed persons, without regard to race, religion, color, national origin, ancestry, sex, age, or disability. If you believe you have been discriminated against in any program, activity, facility, or if you desire further information, please write to the Office for Equal Opportunity, US Department of the Interior, Office of the Secretary, Washington, DC 20240.