



Raccoons in Rhode Island

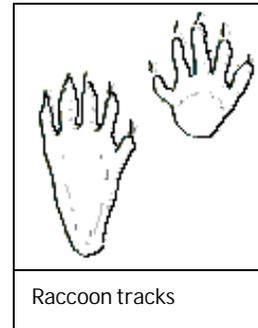
Raccoons are one of the most recognizable furbearers in suburban environments. They are widely distributed across North America, and can be found anywhere suitable habitat exists. Their striped tail and masked face easily identifies them. Although they can be cute and cuddly looking, many people come to regard them as a nuisance when they eat crops, or tear apart garbage. However, raccoons are an especially valuable furbearer species throughout the United States.

Description:



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 a black marking around their eyes, and a long pointed snout.

Raccoons are typically greyish brown in color, but can be quite variable. Raccoon tracks are relatively easy to distinguish. They will show a C-shaped palm area, and have five digits. At the end of each digit, a small dot will be seen.



Life History:

Raccoons are chiefly nocturnal, but can be active during the day also. They prefer wooded habitat adjacent to streams, ponds, or wetlands. They have also become well adapted to living in agricultural and suburban areas. Raccoons are omnivorous, which means they eat both plant material and meat. Their main natural diet includes items such as nuts, fruits, grains, insects, frogs, and bird eggs. They are a very opportunistic species and will also eat food such as birdseed, garbage, and pet food.

Raccoons are not true hibernators, but they may den up during extended cold periods. Hollow logs, trees, rock crevices, ground burrows, or barns and abandoned buildings can all be used for den sites. Studies of raccoons have shown population densities that range from 1 to 15 animals per acre. Captive raccoons have been known to live up to 14 years, but the average lifespan of wild raccoons is usually no longer than 10 or 12 years.

Offspring of the raccoon are born in mid to late spring, after a gestation period of 60 to 73 days. Between 2 and 7 young are born in each litter, and one litter per year is born to each mating female. Juvenile raccoons are unable to open their eyes during their first three weeks, and their ear canals are closed for this period also. Males do not take part in raising the young at all.

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.

Damage Identification:

Raccoons are an opportunistic species, and therefore will commonly get into unsecured garbage containers left outdoors. They can also get into unsecured poultry coops, and 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 will sometimes reach their paws through fencing to get at chicks. Eggs can be completely removed from the nest, or eaten on site. If they are eaten in the nest, the shells will remain.

Raccoons can cause considerable 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. Small gardens can also be damaged, with raccoons eating items such as apples, grapes, and other fruits and vegetables. Raccoons that are in search of grubs and earthworms can damage lawns.



Damage Prevention:

Tightly sealed doors and windows on chicken coops can keep raccoons from gaining access into the buildings. Tight meshed hardware cloth can help to keep raccoons from getting into spaces or holes. It is important to remember, however, 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, 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 again not to 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 through 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 help to keep raccoons from getting into the containers also. Also, freezing extremely odorous garbage before putting it on the curbside can drastically cut back its smell.

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 plats, or cloth streamers can be used to deter raccoons, but these methods are usually temporary fixes to the problem.



In Rhode Island, raccoons are recognized as protected furbearers and can be trapped and hunted accordingly. 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 (401) 789-0281.

Raccoons as Disease Carriers:

As many people know, raccoons can carry a variety of diseases, and these diseases can be spread to pets and humans. The most common of these diseases is rabies, which is carried in the saliva and can be transmitted by bites or scratches. This disease causes the raccoon to exhibit a wide range of symptoms from aggressiveness and rage, to aimless wandering, lethargy, weakness of the hind legs, and loss of awareness. They can also carry canine distemper, which causes the animal to show respiratory distress, sneezing, coughing, or nasal discharge. Other less common diseases that can be carried by raccoons are Tularemia, a bacterial infection, roundworm, stomachworm, or Trichonosis. Anyone who is cleaning raccoon feces from an area should be aware that *Parvovirus antiritis* could be carried in the feces. 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 with a potentially infected raccoon. 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.

For more information regarding these diseases, contact the Department of Fish and Wildlife Field Headquarters at (401) 789-0281, or the Department of Health at (401) 222-2577.

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