

# Living With Raccoons

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## RACCOON FACTS

Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) belong to the Procyonidae (those who came before dogs family). This highly intelligent mammal has a rounded head with short nose, small ears, and a sturdy body with minimum-length, thick, grayish brown fur. Raccoons are easily identified by (1) a distinctive pattern of alternating black and yellowish white rings around a large, bushy tail and (2) a unique narrow black face mask with two white patches above the eyes. They average 2 to 3 feet long (including the tail) and 12 inches high, weigh 8 to 22 pounds (heaviest in autumn), and live for 10 to 13 years. Females produce one litter a year, numbering from one to six kits and averaging four or five.

Over most of the U.S. and southern Canada, except in the western mountain ranges, raccoons are found in many different habitats, especially near streams, ponds, and marshes in mature wooded areas. Their range is expanding further north into Canada, because of habitat lost to agriculture and the apparent warming of northern weather. As humans have moved into raccoon habitat, this mammal has proven more adaptable than most. For nesting sites it prefers warm, dry, dark, easily protected areas. In the wild, it dens in tree hollows, hollow logs, or sometimes rocky caverns. In urban areas, raccoons may nest in drainpipes, basements, crawl spaces and house attics. Raccoon populations now are actually densest in suburban and urban areas.

Raccoons will eat whatever their environment provides. In the rural environment, they eat insects, nuts, worms, frogs, shellfish, fish, mammals, birds, eggs, grubs, snakes, and fruits. In agricultural areas, they may feed on corn crops, poultry and garden and orchard vegetables and fruits. In urban settings, an easily opened garbage can is hard for them to resist. They are nocturnal but are occasionally active in daytime.

They are fairly sociable and often den with other raccoons. In colder regions, raccoons may sleep for a good portion of the winter; in the summer, they find shady, cool places to rest. They are territorial with limited private ranges, approximately 1 mile in diameter. Often their territories overlap with those of other raccoons but boundary clashes are rare. When confronting each other, they often grunt threateningly but seldom fight.

The species scientific name, *lotor*, means the washer, because raccoons have been observed dunking their food in water before eating it. This behavior in captivity is thought to mimic behavior in the wild, where raccoons hunt in or near water and hold their catch submerged before eating it. In the wild, they do not wash all food before eating.

Raccoons have keen senses of smell and hearing. They are strong and agile, hence good tree and fence climbers. Each foot has five long and slender digits, which operate with remarkable dexterity. In the wild, they use their front feet for finding food in water, opening shellfish, and conveying food to the mouth. In adapting to human habitat, they often apply this dexterity to opening garbage cans and pet food storage containers.

Zoologists attribute the raccoons adaptability to transmission of culture, a mammalian trait this creature has developed to a high level. The young quickly pick up new skills from adults and then can make their own adjustments or adaptations to new circumstances.

The raccoons primary enemies are humans, dog packs, traps, and automobiles. Many would-be larger predators know better than to take on an adult raccoon, a tough fighter with razor-sharp teeth. If threatened, the raccoon will often try a counter threat, fluffing out its fur so that it appears larger and uttering a throaty growl or cry. Raccoons may appear bold but usually are not aggressive except during mating season or when defending their young. However, their strength, teeth, and claws equip them to defend themselves effectively.

Raccoons are so common that you need not look far for them, and as their natural habitat shrinks, they are increasingly found in urban areas. They are night creatures and will be shy in areas where they are hunted. Where people do not pursue them with rifles and dogs, they are curious animals. Their tracks are easily identifiable, looking much like a human handprint.

## TIPS

### 1. Raccoons Raiding Garbage Cans:

Raccoons have learned, through adapting to human habitat, that garbage cans are excellent sources of food. To raccoon-proof a garbage can, fasten the lid securely with rope, bungee cords, chain, or even weights. To prevent cans from being knocked over and rolled around, secure the handle to a metal or wooden stake driven into the ground. Store garbage cans in wooden bins or in a shed or garage to limit raccoon access. As a last effort, place an inch or so of ammonia-soaked newspaper or rags in the bottom of the garbage can and sprinkle cayenne pepper on top of the garbage to discourage raccoons. Handle ammonia carefully, and keep in mind that it is toxic to children and animals. The ammonia is intended to deter raccoons with its odor, not to injure them.

### 2. Raccoons on Porch or in Yard:

Fear of Threat to Humans or Pets. Raccoons, like humans, are constantly tending to the basic needs for food and shelter. They find both near us. While they may be just curious, they are probably in search of food and usually are not aggressive unless cornered, mating, or with young. Send them off with a good dousing of water from the hose or a bucket of water. Instruct and remind children not to approach, touch or feed them. Raccoons seldom bother cats unless the cat is territorial and aggressive. Kittens, especially if out at night, may be seen as prey. Store pet food in heavy-duty plastic containers with tamper-resistant lids. Try talking to your neighbors, one of more of whom may deliberately feed raccoons because they are so cute. Try to discourage this practice by reminding neighbors not to leave out pet food dishes and to store pet food securely. Use pet doors at your own risk. Lock them at night, if possible, or you may be surprised to discover that a skunk, opossum, or raccoon has invited itself into your home. Some newer models can be opened only by pets wearing a special magnetic collar.

### 3. Raccoons in the House:

Occasionally a raccoon will find its way into a house through a pet door or chimney and be unable to find its way out.

A panicked raccoon can cause extensive damage, so close doors to all other rooms in the house, open doors and windows to the outside and leave the house. Wait quietly for the raccoon to find its way out. Do not use food as a lure; this will make wildlife associate food with humans and return for more. If the raccoon has not left in a reasonable period of time, call your local wildlife agency. Only professionally trained wildlife workers should attempt capture (as opposed to live-trapping) of raccoons.

### 4. Raccoons Under the House or Deck:

In the mating and nesting season, these animals are especially attracted to warm, dry, dark, and easily defended areas for temporary homes. The deterrents listed here should never be used during baby season as they may prevent the mother from returning, resulting in orphaned, starving babies. Limit and eliminate access by following these steps:

- \* Close off all but one access route to the den area.

- \* Gather all materials to close the remaining entrance and place them outside the opening. Sheet metal works best, or you can use sturdy wire mesh or wood, hammer, nails, etc.

- \* Toss ammonia-soaked rags into the space: the pungent odor annoys the animals with their keen sense of smell. Check daily to ensure that the odor is present; replenish as needed. Place small bowls of ammonia on either side of the entryway; refill daily for at least two weeks. Use ammonia carefully, however, because it can be toxic to children and to domestic and wild animals. The aim is strictly to drive away the raccoon with the odor.

- \* Brightly light the area, day and night. This is annoying to nocturnal animals; it is easily accomplished by taping a mechanics droplight or trouble light to a long two-by-four and sliding it into the space. Or try placing a radio near the opening and playing it loudly day and night. (This may annoy your neighbors more than the raccoons, however.)

- \* Spread a light layer of flour on the ground outside the entrance, covering an area large enough to record footprints as the animals exit. After sunset, begin checking the flour every 45 minutes for exiting tracks. When you see tracks, seal the opening tightly, unless you hear sounds that indicate the presence of kits.

- \* If you do hear kits, leave the access open so the mother can tend her young; repeat the flour-tracking process when they begin to follow their mother hunting (at about 8 weeks). Do not approach the den when the mother is inside, as her protective instinct can make her dangerous.

- \* If you hear noise after closing the entrance, determine where it is coming from. Check outside the blocked entrance as a determined raccoon will scratch and pull at the barrier to regain access. If the sound is coming from inside the enclosure, an animal is trapped inside; reopen the area and repeat the process until all the den residents have departed.

- \* Consider live-trapping as the last alternative. It is rarely a permanent solution, because raccoons are usually plentiful enough that others will soon replace those trapped; also, live traps are expensive. Check with local wildlife agencies regarding live-trapping of raccoons and appropriate release sites. Never live-trap during baby season.

#### 5. Raccoons in the Attic or on the Roof:

Attics and roofs can be good nesting locations from a raccoons point of view. The following deterrents should never be used during baby season as they may prevent the mother from returning, resulting in orphaned, starving babies. \*Limit access by following the steps under Raccoons Under the House or Deck. Unless the roof is easily accessible to you, you may have to forgo the flour tracking and depend on the other steps. Be sure to keep replenishing the ammonia until you no longer hear sounds in the attic; then close the opening. \*Remove trellises, vines, shrubs, tree limbs or other objects that may give animals a route to the roof or attic.

Wrap tree trunks with 2-foot wide sheet metal, positioning it at least 2 feet above the ground to prevent raccoons from jumping over the barrier and climbing trees for access to buildings.

\*Replace shingles, repair holes near eaves, and cover the chimney with heavy mesh wire.

#### 6. Raccoons in the Chimney:

Raccoons will den in uncapped chimneys and even sometimes bear young there. They will use the fireplace flue because of the smoke shelf. \*Prevent entry by capping chimneys with a commercial chimney cap, wire mesh, or other cover. \*If a raccoon is in your chimney, place a small bowl of

ammonia at the base of the chimney so the fumes will carry upward. (Close fireplace doors or set a barrier across the opening to control odor and prevent the raccoon from exiting via the house.) Or lower a bag filled with mothballs or rags soaked in ammonia from the top. Be sure to leave the top open so the animal can climb out. Make sure that kits are not in the chimney. If they should be disturbed (and ammonia should not be used) as this may prevent the mother from returning.

7. Orphaned Baby Raccoons.

It is normal for raccoon mothers to leave their young in order to hunt. It is also normal for kits to whine and cry like puppies. \*Unless you can observe the area for many hours, it is difficult to determine whether the mother is truly missing or just temporarily away. If the young cry continuously, with no quiet periods during which the mother may be feeding them, call Project Wildlife or another local wildlife agency to get further information on evaluating the situation.

8. Raccoons in the Garden or Fruit Trees:

Raccoons are good climbers and relish fruit, but they may break branches and compete with the grower's enjoyment of his or her crop. Raccoons also like to help themselves to grapes and corn just before they are ready for picking. \*Keep the yard free of fallen fruit. Wrap a strip of sheet metal (about 2 feet wide) around the trunk of the tree, positioning it at least 2 feet above the ground so the animal cannot jump over it and continue up the trunk. \*Use extra vigilance in chasing animals away, using lights and loud noises, to deter raccoons long enough for crops to be harvested.

9. Raccoons in Ponds, Hot Tubs, and Pools:

Raccoons are attracted to water because they associate it with fish and other prey in the wild. \*Cover hot tubs and pools at night when animals are active. \*If the pond isn't too large, submerge a 2-foot-wide wire mesh horizontally around the edge. Roll out the mesh, leaving it lightly secured under water. Raccoons can't reach over the wire and tend not to stand on it because it is unstable. See also suggestions about the use of electric fencing in the following section. \*If you are so inclined, leave open access to the pond so the raccoon can share the water with you.

10 Raccoons Digging Up Garden Plants and Lawn:

. Raccoons dig in search of worms, insects and grubs tiny, wormlike larval stages of insects that live in lawns. The good news is that they won't eat your plants. The bad news is that they will dig them up to get at the food source in the soil below.

\* Sprinkle lawns or planters with cayenne pepper to discourage grub hunters.

\* Control grub populations so that raccoons will not be drawn to your lawn in the first place. A commercial product called Grub Attack is an effective organic control.

\* Fasten bird netting over garden plants. It is easier for raccoons to dig elsewhere than to remove the netting.

\* Improve existing fences by enclosing any open area between the bottom of the fence and the ground. Or install fence extenders facing outward at a 45-degree angle on top of each post, with two or three strands of wire strung between them.

\* If the area is fairly small, try sinking jars filled with ammonia into the ground, with sponges as wicks. Be sure the jars are anchored in the soil to prevent spilling. Or hang socks filled with mothballs.

\* Serious gardeners might consider an electrified fence. String ordinary, 2-millimeter galvanized wire along insulator posts around the perimeter. The wire should start about 8 inches above the ground to prevent crawling underneath and lines should be spaced close together so animals cannot reach through. Connect the wires to an approved fence charger with alternating current not exceeding 12 volts, which can be purchased relatively cheaply at feed stores. Be sure to check with your local building inspection department for installation guidelines and/or limitations.

Trapping and relocation of raccoons is not a recommended or viable alternative. Wild animals are territorial & like species will simply take over the area vacated by the relocated or dead animal.

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