



RACCOON

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The raccoon is a medium-size woods mammal with the scientific name *Procyon lotor*. *Procyon* means "before dog," implying that the raccoon is less-advanced than the dog from an evolutionary standpoint; *lotor* refers to the species' habit of dunking food in water before consumption. The common names "raccoon" and "coon" are anglicized versions of the Indian word "arocoun." It's fitting that the common names evolved from a native American word, as the raccoon is strictly a New World animal found in North and Central America.

As with many wildlife species, we view the raccoon with mixed emotions. Some coons are destructive, damaging crops and gardens and raiding nests of game and domestic birds. They're valuable in many ways, too: a prime pelt brings good money on the fur market, and hunting coons with hounds is an exciting, unique sport with a tradition as old as the hills. But in the end, the true value of any life form cannot be measured in man's terms. Raccoons have worth simply because they form one of the many fascinating and interlocking segments of nature.

Biology

Raccoons range in size from 28-38 inches, which includes a 10-inch tail, and weigh 10-30 pounds. Males are generally larger and heavier than females. Records exist of coons weighing up to 40 pounds, but individuals this heavy are extremely rare.

The fur of a coon is long, soft and colored a grizzled black-brown. The bushy tail is marked with alternating rings of light and dark fur. Broad cheeks, a long slender muzzle, erect ears and a black strip or mask across the cheeks and eyes give the raccoon an alert appearance. Albinism (a lack of pigment producing a white individual with pink eyes) and melanism (which produces a totally black animal) occur infrequently. The fur on a coon's feet is light gray in color, and the soles of the paws are hairless. Coons shed in April, producing coats with thinner, lighter guard hairs; in autumn, heavier fur grows in and the pelts become prime.

Raccoons are found throughout Pennsylvania, most often near constant sources of water—lakes, streams, rivers—for food hunting, drinking and dunking of food items. They also adapt well to people and human activities; some coons live in towns and cities, where they den in storm sewers and drainpipes and raid garbage cans for food.

Raccoons are omnivorous. This means they eat a tremendous variety of food, both vegetable and animal, including wild cherries and grapes, raspberries, blackberries, persimmons, apples, beechnuts, acorns, melons, corn, grass, leaves, earthworms, crickets, grasshoppers, beetles, grubs, fish, frogs, crayfish, mice, carrion, eggs, etc.

Coons have excellent senses of hearing, sight and smell. They also possess an acute sense of touch in their forefeet, enabling them to catch fish and other small, quick prey. Long, sharp claws anchor slippery food items. No one knows exactly why, but if there's a water source nearby, raccoons usually "wash" their food. Many naturalists believe the coons dunk or feel food rather than wash it, deriving some information from handling the food underwater which may cause them to accept or reject the item.

Coons are adept climbers, and as they're nocturnal they spend most of the daylight hours in trees. On warm, bright days they like to sun themselves while lying flat on horizontal limbs, in squirrel leaf nests or curled up in the crotches of trees. Then at night, they descend in search of food. They travel, feed and hunt almost exclusively on the ground. Most coons have central home dens as well as others scattered about their feeding ranges. Adult home ranges are generally about a mile in diameter, greater when food is scarce. An ideal den or nesting site is a hollow in a large tree trunk or limb, but raccoons also use old woodchuck burrows, caves, rock crevices and abandoned farm buildings.

Raccoons have short, stout builds. Like bears, they are plantigrade (flat-footed), walking on the sole of the foot with the heel touching the ground. They're relatively slow runners but fierce fighters—especially females with young. Men and dogs are the adults' main enemies, although owls, foxes and bobcats may take young that stray from their mothers' protection. Coons are strong swimmers.

A raccoon makes a variety of sounds, including barks, hisses, a wailing tremolo, a *churr-churr* noise often given while the animal is feeding, and a piercing scream of alarm or fear.

By late autumn, coons have eaten enough to produce a heavy layer of fat that helps sustain them until spring, although they eat whatever food they can find in winter. They do not store food. Unlike woodchucks, raccoons are not true hibernators; they den up and sleep soundly when temperatures fall below about 25 degrees Fahrenheit, but emerge at different times throughout the winter during warm spells. They are considerably leaner by spring, having burned up much fat.

Breeding takes place in January or February. Following a two-month gestation period, young are born in March and April. Usual litter size is 3-5 young, with four the average. Cubs weigh about three ounces at birth, are covered with yellow-gray fur and have faintly banded tails. After about 19 days their eyes open, and when four weeks old they begin to accompany the female on short feeding forays. Weaning starts at about eight weeks; by the time they're three or four months old, cub coons are large and independent enough to be on their own.

The male usually stays with the female after mating and until babies are born, and may help rear the young. By the time the young mature, however, the father has usually gone off on his own.

Many family groups--mother and offspring--stay together through the young's first winter. Most yearling females breed at this time, but males of the same age probably do not breed for another year. If for some reason a female doesn't breed in winter, she may become receptive later in the spring and bear young in the summer. Small coons found in the fall are the result of this late breeding. By late fall, young coons follow their mother away from the den nightly in search of food.

In spring, juveniles disperse from the areas in which they were born. Young coons may move only a mile or two or may travel long distances. Records exist of young males apparently dispersing up to 150 miles, although movement of this magnitude is unusual.

Raccoons exhibit some social hierarchy, with older males and females with young dominant. Individuals do not defend fixed territories or ranges against other raccoons, however.

Captive raccoons have lived up to age 18, but their life expectancy in the wild is probably about 10 years. Important mortality factors are lack of food in a hard long-lasting winter, parasitism, hunting, trapping and disease. Also, many coons are killed on highways.

Population

While numbers of larger predators are dropping throughout the United States, the raccoon is holding its own or increasing in many areas. It now occurs in all 50 states and into Central America but is not found in the higher reaches of the Rocky Mountains or some of the western deserts.

In Pennsylvania, the raccoon was intensely hunted and trapped for its valuable fur for many years. During periods of low fur prices, however, the animal's population grew and it became abundant throughout the state.

Local populations may fluctuate because of severe weather, food scarcities, development of rural land, hunting and trapping pressures, outbreaks of encephalitis and canine distemper, and habitat change. Population concentrations vary with habitat; researchers have estimated one raccoon per 0.63 acres of excellent habitat and one raccoon per two acres of good habitat.

Raccoons become highly susceptible to encephalitis and distemper if they overpopulate a given area. However, as long as high fur prices provide an impetus for trappers to harvest coons, disease problems are minimal.

Habitat

Raccoons are adaptable, and many types of terrain provide suitable areas for them to live. As a rule, they prefer forested areas which offer plentiful den sites. They favor hardwood over coniferous forests, because hardwood trees provide more food (nuts, fruits) and are more apt to develop cavities and hollow limbs suitable for shelter. Swamps and fertile bottom lands are good habitat; raccoons often thrive near water courses, where good hunting opportunities exist. A raccoon will wade up a small spring run in search of crayfish, aquatic insects, minnows and other food.

The Game Commission has never had to improve habitat specifically for the raccoon because the species manages well on its own. In managing forests on State Game Lands, however, the Commission tries to protect mature hardwoods which are used as den trees by raccoons and other wildlife species.

A varied habitat--trees of different ages and types, brush, herbaceous vegetation--is ideal as it provides food during all seasons. In general, habitat improvement for turkeys, squirrels or deer also benefits raccoons. Grassy openings are excellent sources for insect food. Food-producers such as grapevines, blackberry, raspberry and greenbriar patches, black cherry trees, oaks and beeches should be encouraged and maintained. Beaver dams benefit raccoons--and many other wildlife species--by producing plentiful aquatic food.

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