

# Wildlife Damage Management Fact Sheet Series

# Raccoons

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The raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) is a medium-sized mammal that is easily recognized by the black “mask” over its eyes and a tail with 5 to 10 black rings. Raccoons range in size from 28 to 38 inches long, including a 10-inch tail, and weigh 10 to 30 pounds. Males are generally larger than females. Raccoons have long, soft fur that is a grizzled black-brown color.

## General Biology

Raccoons mate in January or February and give birth to three to six young after a 63-day gestation period. Male raccoons usually stay with the female after mating and may help rear the litter. Young raccoons stay in the den but after four weeks may accompany their mother on brief outings in search of food. Weaning begins at about eight weeks, and raccoons born in early spring often become independent by fall. Young raccoons stay with their mother through their first winter and disperse from the area in which they were born the following spring. In winter raccoons do not truly hibernate, but they may become inactive when temperatures fall below 25° F and may lose half their fall body weight as they live on their stored body fat.

Raccoons make 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.

## Habitat and Food Habits

Raccoons are very adaptable and can live in many types of habitat. They prefer



Figure 1. A simple two-wire electric fence

hardwood forests with abundant den sites but may also be found in swamps and fertile bottomlands where food is abundant. Raccoons prefer wooded areas near streams, rivers, or other water sources, making dens in hollow trees, ground burrows, brush piles, muskrat houses, barns and abandoned buildings, dense clumps of cattails, haystacks, and caves or rock crevices.

Most raccoons have central home dens as well as others scattered about their home ranges. Adult home ranges are about a mile in diameter but may be larg-

er when food is scarce. Because raccoons move around and feed at night, these “masked bandits” are seldom seen.

Raccoons are omnivorous and eat a variety of foods, including fruits, berries, nuts, acorns, corn, melons, grass, leaves, snails, earthworms, insects, crayfish, clams, frogs, fish, turtles, mice, carrion, and the eggs and young of birds or reptiles. This species has the unique habit of sometimes dunking its food in water before consuming it. Like many other animals, raccoons are opportunists, eating garbage, garden vegetables, tree seeds,

fruit, and pet food left outdoors in urban and suburban areas. Raccoon densities may reach 30 to 40 individuals per square mile in rural areas and more than 100 per square mile in suburban and urban areas.

### **Description of Damage**

Raccoons may cause a variety of damage or nuisance problems, and their distinctive tracks often provide evidence of their involvement in damage situations. Raccoons can damage vegetable gardens and crops, particularly sweet corn that is ripe and ready for harvesting. Partially eaten ears with the husks pulled back or stalks that have broken as the animals climb to get at the ears may indicate raccoon damage. Raccoons also like watermelons and will dig through the rind to reach in and pull out the contents with their paws. In addition, they will occasionally kill poultry on nests or roosts in chicken coops.

Raccoons can also cause damage or become a nuisance around houses and outbuildings when they take up residence in attics or chimneys or raid garbage cans in search of food. Occasionally, raccoons may tear off boards or shingles to get into an attic or wall space. Once inside, they may damage insulation and chew holes. In addition, raccoon feces may accumulate and create unpleasant odors.

### **Laws and Regulations**

Raccoons are protected furbearers in New York and there are established hunting and trapping seasons. Current New York State Environmental Conservation Law (Section 11-0523) states that in the Southern Zone, raccoons injuring private property may be taken by the owner, lessee, or family member at any time and in any manner. In both the Northern and Southern Zones, raccoons injuring property on occupied farms or lands may be taken by trapping or firearm by the property owner, occupants of the land, or a person authorized in writing. Any raccoons taken under these laws must be immediately buried or cremated or released alive somewhere on the property. Licensed nuisance wildlife control operators may transport wildlife off of the property and will do so for a fee. Contact your local Department of Environmental Conservation office for the name of a

licensed nuisance wildlife control operator in your area.

When shooting or trapping to manage raccoon problems, you must follow local ordinances, so it is best to consult with local law enforcement authorities or regional Department of Environmental Conservation offices if you have questions regarding specific localities. In other states, consult with your state wildlife agency about laws and regulations pertaining to raccoons before shooting or trapping nuisance animals.

### **Preventing Damage**

#### **Population Reduction**

Raccoons can be easily caught in traps. Live traps at least 10 x 12 x 32 inches constructed of sturdy metal or wire can be baited with marshmallows to reduce capture of nontarget mammals.

Raccoons may also be captured in foothold traps (#1 or #1 1/2) baited with sardines. Two types of foothold traps, the egg trap and the duffer trap, are designed to catch raccoons without being a hazard to pets and other nontarget species. In addition, these traps reduce the possibility of injury that can occur if captured raccoons chew their feet.

Body-gripping traps (#160 or #220) can also be used. These traps are designed to kill quickly and should not be used where there is a chance of catching pets or other nontarget animals. A body-gripping trap can be placed in a special set called a "raccoon box" (Figure 2) to eliminate risk to nontarget animals such as dogs or cats. The wooden box has an entrance hole on the bottom, is suspended 6 inches above the ground, and mounted on a tree trunk. They can also be mounted 5 or more feet off the ground out of the reach of dogs.

#### **Repellents**

No toxicants or fumigants are currently registered in New York State for raccoon control. Repellents tested to date have been ineffective.

#### **Scare Devices**

Scare devices such as lights, radios, dogs, scarecrows, streamers, and aluminum pans have been unsuccessful against raccoons.



Figure 2. Raccoon box

### **Fencing and Other Barriers**

Exclusion is the best way to prevent or reduce raccoon damage. Garden crops can be protected with a 2-wire electric fence (Figure 1) with wires 5 and 10 inches above ground. Use only fence designs approved for wildlife control; never connect fences directly to household current. Fences can be turned off during the day or left on continually if woodchuck damage is also a problem. Fences should be installed at least two weeks before crops reach vulnerable stages so that raccoons do not develop the habit of feeding in that location.

To protect sweet corn, another effective method of reducing raccoon damage is to wrap filament tape around ripening ears of corn. When using tape, it is important to apply the type that has glass-yarn filaments embedded within so that raccoons cannot tear through the tape. Taping is more labor intensive than fencing but may be more practical and acceptable for small backyard gardens.

To prevent raccoons from taking up residence in chimneys, fasten a commercial chimney cap constructed of sheet metal and heavy screen over the chimney entrance. Trim tree limbs adjacent to rooftops because raccoons may use them for access. When trying to exclude raccoons from chimneys in the spring or summer, first make certain that no young are present in the chimney. Always make

sure that all raccoons have left or have been removed from any area before sealing it.

### **Cultural Practices**

You can take several simple steps to minimize the attractiveness of your property to raccoons. Remove obvious sources of food or shelter. Avoid leaving pet food outside, and store garbage in metal or plastic containers with tight-fitting lids to discourage raccoons from raiding garbage cans.

Secure cans to a rack or tie them to a support to prevent raccoons from tipping them over. Cover compost piles as well to reduce their attractiveness to raccoons and prevent raccoon feces from entering the compost. Consider not feeding birds during the warmer seasons.

### **Health Concerns**

#### **Rabies**

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. Animals most often infected include raccoons, skunks, foxes, and bats. The virus is present in the saliva and nervous tissue of a rabid animal. Avoiding encounters with raccoons can reduce the risk of exposure to rabies. Do not attempt to handle or capture a sick or apparently "orphaned" animal. Avoid animals that act strangely, especially those that are unusually tame, aggressive, or paralyzed. Be suspicious of daytime activity in raccoons, which normally are most active at night. In New York over the last decade more than 50 percent of the wild animals confirmed to have rabies each year have been raccoons.

Wild mammals as well as cats, dogs, ferrets, and livestock may contract rabies. Thus it is important to have all dogs and cats regularly vaccinated for rabies. If your pet has been in a fight with another animal, wear gloves to handle it. Isolate it from other animals and people and telephone your county health department or animal control officer for instructions.

If you or someone you know is bitten or scratched by a raccoon, wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water

and contact your physician immediately. Rabies postexposure vaccinations may be necessary. Consult with your county health department, the NYS Bureau of Communicable Disease Control (518-474-3186), or during evenings and weekends, the NYS Department of Health duty officer (518-465-9720) for additional information.

#### **Raccoon Roundworm**

Roundworm (*Baylisascaris procyonis*) is a potentially dangerous parasite commonly found in the small intestine of raccoons. Raccoon roundworm can be contracted by humans who accidentally ingest roundworm eggs (shed in raccoon droppings) from contaminated areas or by not washing hands after working or playing in or around a contaminated area. Small children are particularly vulnerable because they tend to put their hands and other objects in their mouths. A small number of children have died from this disease. Larvae migrate to various tissues but if they enter the eyes or brain they can cause disorders of the eye or central nervous system.

Raccoons commonly use latrine areas at the base of trees, on fallen logs, large rocks, and woodpiles and in barns and other outbuildings. To reduce risk associated with these areas, keep children from playing in or around these areas. When cleaning areas that may have been contaminated by raccoon feces, such as haylofts, fireplaces, and attics, wear disposable rubber gloves, disposable clothes, and a dust mask. Burn all material that is removed. Roundworm eggs can survive for years in the environment and are resistant to all common disinfectants.

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Figure 1 from Hygnstrom, S., et al. 1994.

Figure 2 by Michael Stickney

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