

Natural. Valued. Protected.

RACCOON (*Procyon lotor*)

Fall 2009

Life Cycle

Raccoons live an average of four years in the wild, but can live as long as 13 to 14 years. Most males mature at two years, while females mature as early as one year. Breeding usually occurs February to March with females giving birth 60 to 73 days later. The average litter size is four to five, but can range from one to nine kits. The young are weaned at five weeks, but continue to stay with their mother, usually until fall. Occasionally the young will spend the first winter with the mother before dispersing in the spring.

Description:

Raccoons have grayish-black fur. They have a distinctive black 'mask' around the eyes and black rings on the tail. Raccoons are 60-95 cm long (excluding the tail) and weigh from 7-20 kg.

Hibernation:

Usually, raccoons are inactive for about four months during the winter. They may den together, usually in family groups. Raccoons are not true hibernators though. During milder winter weather, they may be active.

Habitat:

Raccoons can be found in any habitat. They are found at very low densities in northern Ontario. In rural areas, raccoon densities can vary from four to 20 animals per square kilometre depending on the habitat. In urban situations, densities may go as high as 100 animals per square kilometre. People in urban areas should not attempt to relocate nuisance raccoons into the wild since this often leads to high mortality.

Only male raccoons have territories and territories usually overlap. Males will fight over females and home territories. When young raccoons disperse, they must establish their own territories.

Raccoons prefer dark quiet areas close to a food source, as den sites. Examples include hollow trees, attics, sheds, garages, chimneys, woodpiles and under decks.

Diet:

Raccoons eat fruits, berries, nuts, seeds, insects, crayfish, frogs, fish, eggs, birds, vegetables, grubs and larvae, and garbage of any type.

Behaviour:

Raccoons are normally nocturnal, however during breeding they may be active during the day. In urban situations, they may be active during the day if they have been disturbed in their resting place. It could be a sign of illness or disease if raccoons remain in a tree for more than a day when there is nothing, such as a dog, to prevent them from leaving. Male raccoons are solitary and are usually the ones people find sleeping on their decks. They can usually be frightened away or will leave at night. Females are usually the ones found nesting in attics over the summer months. Kits can be identified by their loud "chippery" sounds, which is similar to bird chirping.

Raccoons have incredible manual dexterity and can open garbage can lids and house vents and tear off soffit or roof shingles. Raccoons in an urban setting can become quite accustomed to humans. When threatened, they will growl like a dog. Raccoons prefer to avoid confrontation and will only get aggressive when they are cornered or protecting their young.

Predators:

Normal predators include humans, dogs, coyotes, foxes and owls.

Diseases:

In North America, raccoons are carriers of three common wildlife diseases: rabies, distemper and mange. Animals with these diseases may exhibit symptoms like staggering and falling over, loss of fear of humans or pets, weight loss, and poor coat condition. Diseased animals may also appear disoriented, have paralyzed hind limbs, and have mucus caked around the eyes and nose. Raccoons can also carry other diseases and parasites that can be infectious to other species of wildlife, domestic animals, and humans. These include parvovirus, leptospirosis, and Baylisascaris procyonis.

Rabies and distemper are both viral diseases. Rabies can be transmitted to non-immunized humans, livestock and pets, usually by exposure to saliva of an infected animal. Distemper is a major viral disease in raccoons but cannot be transmitted to humans or immunized pets. Transmission of distemper occurs through contact with the excretions or secretions of infected animals. Mange is not as common as distemper or rabies in raccoons across North America. Mange is caused by a mite and can be transmitted to humans and pets. Symptoms include an itching red rash. Parvovirus can be transmitted to non-immunized pets. Leptospirosis is a bacterial infection that can be transmitted to humans through contact with infected water, blood or urine. Approximately 80 per cent of raccoons in Ontario are infected with the roundworm Baylisascaris procyonis. This parasite is found in raccoon faeces and can be fatal to humans.

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