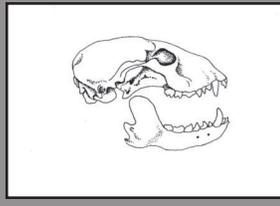
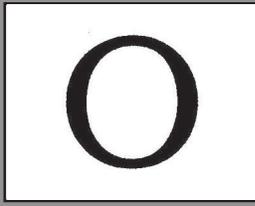


Raccoon

Family Procyonidae



Who doesn't recognize the photogenic raccoon? The trademark black mask, bushy, ringed tail, and quirky way of eating after dipping its food in water. This "masked bandit" is found in woodlands, farms, even in suburban neighborhoods. And always near water.

They are very adept at adapting to human activity. Even if you've never seen a raccoon, had one raid your trashcan or scraps left behind in an outdoor pet dish, you can be sure one is denning in a cavity somewhere near you.

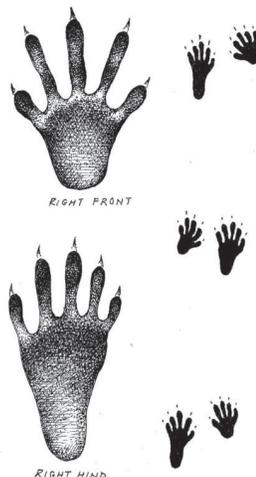
The raccoon's scientific name is *Procyon lotor*. "**lotor**" refers to their habit of dunking food in water before eating it. The common name "raccoon" is an anglicized version of the Indian word "arakun."



Raccoons amble or waddle like bears when they walk. And like bears, they easily stand on their hind legs. Both are considered **plantigrades**, meaning they can walk partly or wholly on the soles of their feet with the heel touching the ground.

They're relatively slow runners but can put up a fierce fight when confronted -- especially females with young. **Raccoons are very strong swimmers** and have been known to drown dogs that chase them into water.

Raccoons can also be very vocal, making a variety of barks, hisses or wails. And when they are alarmed they can produce a piercing scream.



Wash your hands please!

Raccoons can see, hear & smell very well. They also possess an acute sense of touch in their forefeet, enabling them to catch fish and other small, quick prey. Their long, sharp claws help grasp the slippery food items.

No one is really sure why a raccoon sometimes appears to "wash" its food underwater before eating it. Perhaps to decide whether or not they will accept or reject the prey item they just grabbed.

Raccoons in the 'Hood

We know they can adapt, but what do raccoons need in order to live comfortably? There are many types of landscapes which provide suitable areas for raccoons, but **they prefer woodlands that offer plenty of den sites**. Hardwoods are favored over coniferous forests because of the availability of food like nuts & fruits. Hardwood forests are also where raccoons are more likely to find the cavities and hollow limbs necessary for their shelter.

Water is essential to the raccoon. Swamps, streams and ponds all provide good hunting opportunities for them to find crayfish (below left), aquatic insects, minnows and other food. **Raccoons are omnivores.** This means they eat both vegetable and animal matter, including wild cherries and grapes, raspberries, elderberries (below right), persimmons, apples, beech-nuts, acorns, melons, corn, grass, leaves, earthworms, crickets, grasshoppers, beetles, grubs, fish, frogs, crayfish, mice, carrion, eggs, etc. Raccoons can also be pests, raiding corn-fields and gardens (below center).

Variety in their habitats is important, as is diversity in their foods. Trees of different ages and types, low brush and grassy openings help provide food throughout the year.

Raccoons benefit from management plans that improvement habitat for other animals like turkeys, squirrels & deer. They also benefit from beaver dams, which provide excellent habitat for the aquatic creatures the raccoons like to feed on.

Raccoons are considered a **common species**, found state-wide in Pennsylvania.



Raccoons are **superb climbers** that are generally **nocturnal**. Not surprisingly, they spend most of the day holed up in a tree cavity. On occasion, they may even sun themselves while stretched out on horizontal limbs, in squirrel leaf nests or curled up in a crotch of tree branches.

At night they begin their hunt almost exclusively on the ground - although they will sometimes eat bird eggs or nestlings. **Most raccoons have one home den** but may have a few others scattered about their feeding ranges, which is about a mile in diameter. **An ideal den or nesting site is a hollow in a large tree trunk or limb**, but raccoons will also use old groundhog burrows, caves, rock crevices or abandoned farm buildings.

Raccoons are not true hibernators. Instead they just den up and sleep through much of the winter. If they have an ample supply of food in the summer they will fatten up enough to sustain them from late fall until early spring. **During winter they will sleep in dens when the air temperature falls below about 25 degrees F.** But they will awake and search for food throughout the winter during warm spells. By spring much of their body fat will be gone. The thinner raccoons will make hunting for food an important part of their behavior.

Because they do not hibernate, raccoons are able to **breed** in January or February. Their cubs are born in March and April with a litter of 3-5 young. Cubs weigh about three ounces at birth. Covered with yellow-gray fur and faintly banded tails, their eyes open after about 19 days. At four weeks they begin to accompany the female on short feeding forays. By the time they are three or four months old, cub raccoons are large and independent enough to be on their own. The male may help raise the young, but leaves once they are mature.

Most family groups - mother and offspring - stay together through the young raccoons' first winter. In spring, juveniles disperse from the areas in which they were born. Young raccoons may move only a mile or two or may travel long distances.

Raccoons & Rabies: What You Should Know

Rabies is a serious disease caused by a virus that attacks the central nervous system. Any mammal can get rabies and raccoons have a high incidence of the disease among their populations. Only mammals can get rabies. Birds, snakes, fish, etc. do not generally carry rabies.

The rabies virus is spread through saliva, usually from the bite of an animal that has the disease. Rabies is not spread from blood.

How do you know if an animal has rabies? Rabid animals usually act differently from healthy animals. Wild animals may move slowly or may act as if they are tame. A pet that is usually friendly may snap at you or may try to bite.

Some signs of rabies in mammals are:

- changes in the animal's normal behavior
- signs of tameness (or a dumbness) in a wild animal
- signs of aggression in a pet or wild animal that is not being threatened
- general sickness
- problems swallowing
- increased drooling

If you are bitten, rabies can be prevented by immediate cleansing of the wound and getting a series of rabies shots in your arm. **You must see a doctor right away** to start the painless treatment.

The best way to avoid rabies is to avoid direct contact with wild animals. Never handle a wild animal. It is also extremely important to vaccinate your pets and livestock to stop the spread of rabies. Be sure to get rid of any pet dishes that you keep outside. Raccoons and many other animals become accustomed to outside food dishes as a source of easy food. This behavior puts them in close contact with you and your pets and eliminates their fear of people - a dangerous combination should they become rabid.