



Raccoons

Procyon lotor



The raccoon, (*Procyon lotor*), is closely related to the dog and the bear families although its disposition resembles that of a small bear. Characteristic features include short, pointed ears; a long, pointed snout; and greyish-brown, long fur covering the body. The raccoon's most distinguishing features are the black masks around the eyes and the black rings around the long, bushy tail. A raccoon may be two to three feet or more long and weigh between 15 and 30 pounds when mature. Raccoons are excellent climbers and have very dexterous fore paws. They are primarily nocturnal creatures but occasionally venture out in the daytime particularly toward evening. During the fall and winter months (November through March), they may den-up in their home quarters during the coldest periods. This is not true hibernation, as the raccoons will wander out during warm spells.

Reproduction

Raccoons breed in late winter or early spring. The gestation period is 63 days. Females produce one litter per year ranging in size from three to six young (kits). The litter is born in a sheltered den, usually a hollow log, tree or rock crevice. Raccoons are sociable animals in their family group. After two months of age the young accompany the mother on excursions for food and may travel several miles. Family groups remain intact for about a year.

Distribution and Habitat

Raccoons are very common throughout Connecticut and the northeastern United States. Color shadings in the fur may vary according to age, sex and range area. They inhabit a wide range of habitats, but prefer mature woodlands along streams, ponds, wetlands and marshes. Raccoons require trees, bushes and other cover for protection. Raccoons are adaptable to environmental changes and can live close to human developments that include city life. They may persistently feed on garbage and agricultural crops.

Habits

Raccoons are omnivorous, eating both plant and animal foods. They make their homes in hollow trees or logs, rock dens, brush piles, muskrat houses, barns, abandoned buildings, haystacks, dense clumps of cattails and occasionally ground burrows. Because raccoons are mostly active at night, they can be common in the area but rarely seen. In the spring and early summer their diet consists primarily of insects, crayfish, fish, fresh water mussels or clams and frogs. As the summer passes, their diet also includes all types of fruits, berries, nuts, acorns, vegetables and grains. During the latter part of the growing season, raccoons can cause severe damage to garden crops, especially sweet corn and tomatoes. They also get into trouble by raiding garbage cans and food supplies when camping. Raccoons are usually non-aggressive unless threatened or cornered. Not all cause problems, so attempts to control should be made to remove only rogue or troublesome animals. If animals encountered in daylight are lethargic or disheveled in appearance or display nasal discharge and/or eye infections, they may be diseased.

Raccoon Rabies

Since 1991 thousands of raccoons in CT have become infected. The following symptoms may indicate the presence of rabies, distemper or other diseases in raccoons and other mammals.

- Unprovoked aggression.
- Impaired Movement.
- Paralysis or lack of coordination.
- Unusually friendly behavior.
- Disorientation.

Daylight movement by this normally nocturnal animal doesn't necessarily mean that it is sick. Raccoons often adjust their feeding schedules, especially in the spring when rearing their young. However, contact with any wild or stray animal should be avoided. Report sick or strange-acting animals to your local police, animal control officer, or the [Department of Energy & Environmental Protection Wildlife Division](#) at 860-424-3011.

Economic Importance

The raccoon is an important fur bearer in Connecticut due to its abundance and pelt value. Raccoons are harvested each year during the regulated hunting and trapping seasons. They provide a source of recreation and income to many sports persons. Raccoons are also appreciated for their aesthetic value and wildlife observations. However, because of their ability to tolerate humans, raccoons can become a nuisance pest in areas where they can damage gardens and raid garbage cans. They can be especially destructive on farms where they feed heavily on vegetable and fruit crops. Their damage to sweet corn may be a limiting factor on production in certain areas.

Raccoons may also serve as hosts to various diseases that are transmittable to humans and domestic animals including rabies, trichinosis, tuberculosis, canine distemper, infectious enteritis and coccidiosis.

Damage Recognition

Raccoons may cause severe damage and nuisance problems in a variety of ways. Their distinctive hand like footprints left in soft soil, mud or sand often provide evidence of their involvement. Raccoons will occasionally kill poultry and leave distinctive signs. Heads of adult birds are usually bitten off and left behind some distance from the body. The crop and breast may be torn and chewed and the entrails eaten. Feathers also may be strewn about the poultry yard with bodies dragged to other areas. Young poultry or fowl in pens and cages may be attacked, injured or killed by raccoons reaching through the wire and attempting to pull the birds back through the mesh. Often the necks of birds will be bitten in this effort. Legs or feet of the birds may also be missing. Eggs may be removed completely from the nests or eaten on the spot with only the heavily cracked shell remaining. Raccoons can also destroy bird nests in artificial nesting structures such as wood duck boxes. They climb and may destroy bird feeders.

Raccoons can cause considerable damage to garden and truck crops. Damage to sweet corn is characterized by many partially eaten ears with the husks pulled back. Corn stalks will also be broken as raccoons climb or try to pull them down to get to the ears. Raccoons damage watermelons by digging a small hole in the melon and then hollowing and raking out the contents with their paws.

Raccoons are a considerable nuisance around houses and outbuildings when they seek to gain entrance to attics or chimneys or when they raid garbage areas in search of food. Uncapped chimneys make very adequate substitutes for hollow trees. In extreme cases, shingles or fascia boards may be ripped off to gain access to an attic or wall space.

Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Control measures can either be reductional or protective. Reductional methods include removing offending animals by live-trapping or hunting. Protective measures include traditional fencing, electrical fences, screening and exclusion methods, frightening devices and the use of repellent chemicals.

Exclusion is the best method of coping with raccoon damage. Damage to poultry can generally be prevented by excluding the raccoons from cages or housing areas by tightly covering doors, windows and other openings with wire or hardware cloth screening. Mesh-wire fences with an overhang surrounding poultry yards is also effective. Raccoons are excellent climbers and can gain access by climbing conventional fences or by using overhanging tree limbs to bypass the fence. A hot-wire from an electric fence charger as the top fence wire will greatly increase the effectiveness of fences for excluding raccoons.

Damage to crops such as sweet corn, tomatoes and melons can be effectively stopped by excluding raccoons with a single or double strand of electrical fence wire. Two wires are generally recommended with one wire six inches above the ground. Installation of electrical fencing is relatively easy but the cost is high. The fence can be activated at dusk and tuned off at daybreak. Electric fences should be used with care and caution signs installed. All fence lines must be maintained weed free so vegetation does not touch the electric wires and short them out.

There are several ways to make garbage cans raccoon proof. One method is to attach snaps to the lid and secure the handle of the can to a stake driven into the ground. Lids can also be wired, weighted or clamped in some way to prevent the animals from lifting them off. Garbage may also be stored in plastic or metal containers with tight fitting lids. Cans should be held on a rack or tied to a support to prevent raccoons from tipping them over. Place garbage cans in wooden bins or in the garage to discourage raccoon problems.

To prevent raccoons from taking up residence in chimneys, place a heavy screen cap over the chimney and cement it in place. Overhanging tree limbs and other accesses to roofs should be removed. To prevent raccoons from entering buildings, close all points of entrance. Tacking or nailing slick sheets of metal at least three feet long around corners of outbuildings and vulnerable access areas prevents raccoons from gaining a toehold for climbing in.

Habitat Modification

There are no practical methods of modifying habitats to reduce raccoon depredations, other than removing sources of food (including pet or livestock feed), shelter or garbage that may be attracting animals to the premises.

Frightening Devices

Although a number of techniques have been used in attempts to frighten away raccoons, particularly in sweet corn plantings, none have proven to be consistently affective. These techniques have included the use of lights, portable radios, noisemaking devices and cannons, tethered dogs, scarecrows, plastic or cloth streamers, hanging aluminum pie pans or tin can lids, plastic windmills or mulching with newsprint. All of these may have some temporary effectiveness, but none will provide protection.

Repellents

A variety of materials have been tried to repel raccoons with no proven effectiveness, including blood meal, dog feces and dirty laundry. Once these areas are cleared of animal invasion, appropriate exclusionary methods should be employed for long-term protection.

Toxicants and Fumigants

There are no chemical controls or toxic gases currently registered for raccoon control.

Traps and Trapping Regulations

For complete information on hunting and trapping raccoons, see [The Connecticut Department of Energy & Environmental Protection's Hunting and Trapping Field Guide](#).

The following information is from the DEEP website:

Cage trapping of raccoons occupying buildings, damaging gardens and fruit trees, or causing a disease or safety threat may be successfully done by homeowners, BUT it requires considerable knowledge of state trapping laws and legal options for handling trapped raccoons. Connecticut trapping laws require all persons setting traps to

check those traps once per day and tag all traps with their name. Properly-set, raccoon-sized cage traps (10" x 12" x 32") must be set as close to an opening or damage site as possible. The most effective baits include fishy or fruity smelling items, sunflower seeds, and marshmallows. Trapped raccoons, including females with young, may be released on-site, following capping of chimneys and closing openings. The young should be carefully removed from the nest following the female's capture, making sure that you use bite proof gloves or a capture pole. Place the young in a warm, secure cardboard box near the den opening. Females released on-site will generally return that night for her young. The relocation of trapped raccoons is not allowed under Connecticut law due to the risk of rabies.

Shooting and Hunting Regulations

Hunting, along with trapping, can be a very effective method to reduce raccoon populations in a given area. Shooting, however, is prohibited in most cities. It is advisable to check with local authorities, such as game wardens or animal control officers, before using lethal controls. Special crop damage permits for raccoon control are available for Connecticut commercial growers. These permits can be obtained during the crop growing season where damage is severe.

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