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NORTHWEST WILDLIFE PRESERVATION SOCIETY

Raccoon

Procyon lotor



By Lisa Reynolds

Highly adaptable and intelligent, the cunning raccoon has been able to expand from its original forest habitat to live alongside us in cities. The appearance of raccoons in cities has led them to be considered pests by some, though it's hard not to be impressed by the ability of these mammals to find food and thrive in so many different environments.

Characteristics

Raccoons have been likened to masked bandits, due to a black mask around their eyes and their crafty nature! The black mask is surrounded by a white face, with a black strip down to their black nose. Their bulky body has a humpback appearance, which is covered by dense grey/brown fur. They have a long bushy tail marked with black rings along its length, and black paws with five toes, which are highly dexterous.

The northern raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) is the largest member of the Family *Procyonidae*, which also includes coatis, ringtails, and olingos. Adult raccoons average 60-95 cm (24-37 inches) in length and typically weigh 4.5-10 kg (10-22 pounds), although there is considerable variation in weight depending on the season and the geographical location of the raccoon. Those raccoons found further south tend to be lighter than those living further north.

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Life Cycle

The raccoon mating season runs from January to March, and kits are born a little over two months after mating. Litter size is typically between 2 and 5 kits, which are dependent on their mothers during their early life. Cubs begin exploring 4 to 6 weeks after birth, and are weaned by around 16 weeks of age. Their mother teaches them how to find food, climb trees, and protects them from danger: she can be quite aggressive when protecting her litter. Kits usually remain with their mothers for the first year of their life. At one year of age, raccoons are capable of having litters of their own.

Wild raccoons usually live for 2-3 years, but captive animals can live much longer, exceeding 10 years of age.

Habitat

The raccoon is native to North America, and can be found over a large range on the North American continent- as far south as Central America, and as far north as Canada. The successful spread of raccoons can be attributed in part to their ability to survive in a variety of habitats, including woodland, marshes, and swamps, as well as urban environments. Raccoons usually make their dens near water, which in the countryside could be in tree cavities, abandoned burrows dug by other mammals, or rock crevices. In cities, abandoned buildings, roofs, sewers or chimneys can serve as den sites. Raccoons often have several den sites earmarked for their use at any one time, in case the need emerges for them to vacate one site quickly.



Raccoons can also be found in the wild in several other countries throughout the world, where they have been introduced by humans during the 20th Century. Raccoons were introduced into the former USSR in the 1930s-1950s to be hunted for their fur, and a large population of raccoons still thrive in Russia today. For the same purpose, raccoons were introduced to Germany in the 1930s, where they successfully established themselves, and have now expanded their range

to neighbouring countries. Raccoons have a similar success story in Japan, where they were also introduced from North America beginning in the 1970s, this time to be sold as pets. The demand for them as pets was triggered by a popular Japanese cartoon featuring a boy with a pet raccoon, who ultimately releases his pet raccoon into the forest. Children emulating this cartoon, and the fact that raccoons do not make easy pets, led to many raccoons being released or abandoned into the wild, where they have successfully bred, and caused agricultural and structural damage across the county. The fact that raccoons have no natural predators in these areas coupled with their incredible adaptability has contributed to their success.

Behaviour

Raccoons are omnivores and are not fussy eaters- another factor contributing to their success! They use their incredibly sensitive and dexterous front paws to find and examine food. Raccoons will eat berries,

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fruits, seeds, nuts, eggs, worms, fish, and amphibians. In urban environments, raccoons often scour garbage bins to find food scraps. Raccoons are primarily nocturnal animals, but will change their habits to fit with when food is most readily available. It is not unusual for raccoons to be spotted scavenging for food during daylight hours, particularly in urban environments. Raccoons are excellent climbers and swimmers, which opens up numerous opportunities in their search for food. Urban raccoons display great curiosity, persistence, and intelligence in their quest to locate food, and they are often successful in using their dexterous paws to open relatively complex locks or latches on garbage bins to scavenge for food scraps.

The raccoon does not hibernate through the winter, but in winter months, the raccoon may remain in its den sleeping for several weeks to conserve energy.

With the exception of early life during which offspring stay with their mother, raccoons have classically been thought of as solitary animals. However, recent studies have shown that raccoons may not always be solitary. For example, male raccoons have been reported to share home ranges, particularly when resources are low. It is thought that this sharing may benefit both the subordinate and dominant males, because the subordinate males have the chance of inheriting a good territory, whilst the dominant males can call on a greater number of animals to defend their territory.

Threats

Natural predators of raccoons include coyotes, wolves, bobcats, and great horned owls.

Another threat to raccoons is loss of their original countryside habitats. Although raccoons have been successful in urban environments, the increased proximity of raccoons to humans has led to them being killed when they are seen as pests by humans. Road traffic accidents result in the death of many raccoons each year, particularly in urban areas. Raccoons are also hunted by humans for their pelts.

Diseases such as canine distemper virus and rabies are also a threat to raccoon populations throughout North America. In BC, however, raccoon populations do not carry the rabies virus.

Procyon lotor is not currently threatened by extinction.

What We Can Do To Help

Below are some examples of what we can do to help raccoons. The key is not to encourage raccoons to become dependent on humans for food or shelter, as this proximity often results in conflicts between humans and raccoons, and humans will kill animals that they see as pests.

- Do not deliberately feed raccoons. They can become dependent on humans for food and become aggressive when this food is not available.
- Do not leave easily accessible pet food or garbage around your property.
- Clean up all litter and food scraps after outdoor cooking or picnicking.
- Block off entrances to potential den sites such as attics, sheds and chimneys on your property.
- Do not litter on land or in the water. Help clean up the environment!

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Other Interesting Facts

The '*lotor*' species name of the northern raccoon means 'washer'. If water is available, raccoons often examine objects underwater, which has led to the belief that raccoons wash their food. In fact, wetting their highly innervated front paws increases the responsiveness of these nerves, causing their paws to be even more sensitive. They then use their heightened sense of touch to closely examine each potential meal, to make sure its suitable to eat!

Where & When to view the animal

Since raccoons have adapted to thrive in urban areas, they can often be seen searching for food around the neighbourhoods in Vancouver, particularly at dawn and dusk. There is also a high chance of spotting a raccoon around Stanley Park.

Bibliography

Web Resources:

This informative and entertaining episode of The Nature of Things focuses on the adaptability of urban raccoons (available for viewing within Canada only):

<http://www.cbc.ca/natureofthings/episodes/raccoon-nation>

Hinterland Who's Who website - this website provides a good summary of raccoons and other species:

<http://www.hww.ca/en/species/mammals/raccoon.html>

BCSPCA website- this website contains information about how to humanely encourage raccoons to move on, if they are denning and causing problems on your property:

<http://www.sPCA.bc.ca/welfare/wildlife/urban-wildlife/raccoons.html>

The National Geographic web page on raccoons contains many raccoon pictures, and a map showing this geographical distribution:

<http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/mammals/raccoon/>

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