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Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*)

Description

The raccoon is a medium-sized mammal with a broad appearing face, accented by furred cheeks and a short, pointed muzzle. This creature is easily recognized by its black facial band ("bandit mask") which extends from cheek to cheek across its eyes. The cylindrical, bushy tail, with its 5 to 7 alternating dark brown and yellowish-gray rings and its black tip is another distinctive characteristic of this mammal. The entire pelage (coat) has a dense brownish-gray or yellowish-gray underfur overlaid by longer guard hairs of varying color. The upper body is black, dark brown, or gray with the sides lighter than the back. The tops of the feet are buff-colored with the belly a darker buff. The middle forehead, muzzle, and the short, rounded, rigid ears are beige.

The raccoon has a slightly humpbacked profile and a rocking, flat-footed, shuffling gait.

Males (boars) tend to be somewhat larger than females (sows). Average adult measurements are: weight, 4.1 to 11.8 kg (9-26 lb.); length from nose to tip of tail, 72 to 92 cm (28.4-36.2 in.); length of tail, 22 to 26 cm (8.6-10.2 in.); and height at the shoulders, 23 to 30 cm (9-12 in.). A few exceptional boars may reach 18 kg (40 lbs).

Distribution and Habitat

Raccoons are found throughout the continental United States except for the higher elevation of the Rocky Mountains and the arid southwest. The range of the raccoon extends from southern Canada to Panama. Native only to North and Central America, there are at least 25 recognized subspecies. Only P. l. lotor occurs in New York.

Raccoons are extremely adaptable and can thrive under a variety of conditions. They are common throughout New York, from the central Adirondacks to the suburbs of urban communities. Ideal raccoon areas consist of diverse habitat containing trees, shrubs, and herbaceous plants representing varying stages of succession. Mature trees are important in supplying mast (nuts) and den sites. Shrubs and perennials found in abandoned fields and cut-over areas produce seeds, berries, and fruits through the growing season. Hayfields and grasslands support insects, ground nesting birds, and small mammal populations that raccoons prey upon. Farmland interspersed with cornfields and woodlots is particularly good raccoon habitat. Ponds, lakes, marshes, and streams greatly enhance the attractiveness of areas to raccoons because they will feed intensively on aquatic animal life such as freshwater muscles, crayfish and frogs whenever available. Areas with diverse, intermixed vegetation and wetland areas are generally the best habitats for raccoons.

The raccoon's ability to thrive even in suburban situations is evidence of its adaptability and tolerance of human activities. Mature trees in parks and municipal sewer systems provide suitable den sites, while garbage, gardens, rodents and other small mammals, road killed animals, fruit and ornamental vegetation, bird feeders, and fish ponds are sources of food. Populations of 1 raccoon per 1.5 ha (1 raccoon/3.7 A) have been reported in some suburban habitats.

Life History

Raccoons are not true hibernators, but they do become inactive during periods of cold weather. Thaws in January and February occasionally stir them from their dens. During these winter activity periods they spend their time searching for food, and males wander their territories in search of receptive females. Because females remain receptive for only 3

to 6 days, adverse weather conditions can cause some females to delay breeding until their next estrous cycle, 80 to 120 days later. Males are promiscuous, and do not assist with the care of the young (cubs).

Gestation lasts about 63 days with parturition (birth) typically taking place in late April or early May. Litters from late breeding females (yearlings or adults that failed to conceive in late winter) are born in July or August. Females frequently give birth in a den other than the winter den. The 3 to 5 blind and helpless young weigh about 75 g (2.6 oz.) at birth. By the third week their eyes are open and around the seventh week the mother moves the young to a ground nest, usually near a wetland. At about the ninth week the young weigh 1 kg (2 lb.), make short forays with their mother and are capable of eating solid food. During late spring and early summer wetland areas provide aquatic insect, amphibian, and fish foods which are more nutritious and abundant than plant food items. As the summer progresses the young become increasingly independent so that at 3 to 4 months of age they could survive without the mother.

The young stay within their natal range through their first fall and maintain loose family bonds until late fall. With the arrival of the continuous freezing weather of late autumn, the family dens together for the duration of the winter. The family unit breaks up permanently the following spring when the yearlings disperse from their natal range and seek out their own ranges. In the northern portions of the raccoon's



harvesting of raccoons are designed to ensure that they are taken in a fair and humane manner and only through the fall and winter when the fur is most valuable.

Economic and Social Values

The raccoon's affinity for sweet and field corn is well known by home gardeners and farmers. Raccoons may often cause havoc with garden crops, but they less frequently occur in large enough numbers to seriously damage extensive areas of field corn. Loosely boarded chicken coops are prime targets for raccoons and as a result marauding raccoons can be a substantial problem to owners of small flocks of fowl. Raccoons are significant predators of waterfowl and songbirds in the wild.

Young raccoons are sometimes adopted by people who raise them as pets.¹ If adopted early enough, they are entertaining and friendly, but even though they may seem tame they are really never truly domesticated. By the time they reach maturity, at 2 years of age, they usually become quite temperamental and can inflict serious wounds on unsuspecting people.

Raccoon fur is in considerable demand for outer garments, making such pelts quite valuable. However, few hunters or trappers engage in their sport solely for the value of the pelts. Hunting with hounds and trapping are challenging, specialized, and sometimes exasperating forms of outdoor recreation. Even though raccoons are not exceptionally fast runners (top speed of 24 kph [15 mph]) they are exceedingly clever at leaving a confusing and disjointed trail over fences, into marshes, or across streams, frequently ending in a safe den tree.

Control Methods²

Common raccoon problems around the home like strewn garbage or a raided vegetable garden are usually caused by a few offending individuals. Discharging a loud firearm (in rural areas) will sometimes

¹No wildlife may be held legally in captivity without a permit issued by the N.Y. State Dept. of Environmental Conservation. Contact your local Environmental Conservation Officer for more details.

²For more details on control techniques, see Caslick and Decker 1981.

frighten raccoons away for an entire gardening season. If the problem persists, live traps measuring 25 x 30 x 80 cm (10 x 12 x 32 in.), baited with sardines or catfood, and placed along travel lanes will usually catch the majority of the raccoons.³ It may be necessary to use #2 leg-hold traps to capture some wary adults. Trapped raccoons must be handled with extreme caution; use thick leather gloves, a net, stout boxes or cloth bags to handle and transport them. Release the animals at least 16 km (10 mi.) from the capture site to ensure their permanent removal.

Nest boxes designed for wood ducks can be "raccoon-proofed" by mounting them over water on steel poles which have an inverted shield or apron positioned about 1 m (3 ft.) off the water surface. If nest boxes are attached to trees, the entrance openings should be only 9 cm (3.5 in.) in diameter, which prevents raccoons from destroying the nests.

Rural landowners can keep raccoon populations in check by either engaging in hunting or trapping or allowing others to harvest a few resident raccoons. Raccoons are just one of several harvestable, renewable wildlife resources which residents of New York have the privilege to utilize without fear of seriously diminishing their overall population.

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(Illustrations drawn by Donna Curtin; preparation of the illustrations funded by the American Wildlife Research Foundation, Inc.)

³Raccoons are protected game animals in most states; therefore, state wildlife laws or an Environmental Conservation Officer should be consulted before trapping begins.

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