

The Masked Bandits: Virginia's Raccoons

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The Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) has enjoyed great popularity as an organizational mascot and cartoon character. Despite all of the friendly approval it receives, the Raccoon has a sordid reputation as a member of the wildlife community. It is prolific in Zone 7, without any natural predators, and is found in almost every county in Virginia. Here are some important facts including the good, the bad and the ugly about our friend the Raccoon.

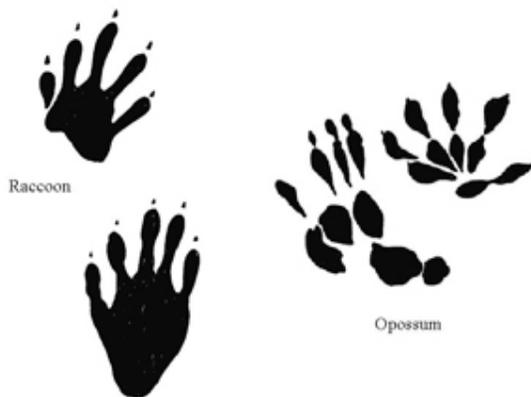


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The Good - The Raccoon enjoys a unique physical appearance and many adaptations that makes it very appealing. The black mask, gray body and bushy ringed tail are features that make it easy to identify. It is a small, stout mammal with a pointed nose and broad face, weighing about 10 to 20 pounds (4 to 9 kg) with some males reaching 30 or more pounds (13 kg). The iconic tail gives the creature stability, balance and makes it easy to climb trees. The tail also contains a storehouse of fat for subsistence during the winter. It has five long toes ending in claws on each paw with sensors on the front paws to help identify objects underwater. It exhibits a behavior that looks like it is washing its food when in fact it is using its paws to locate objects under water. It is also a talented and agile acrobat that can climb and swim with ease. The Raccoon is nocturnal and is rarely seen during daytime hours. The black mask is an adaptation that improves its night vision by absorbing light and reducing glare from outside light.

Raccoons are found all over the state of Virginia, but most abound in the Eastern Coastal Plain close to bodies of water. Inland they live in hardwood forests. Likely habitats include hollowed-out trees, rock crevices, small caves and brush piles. They have adapted to urban areas and often live in abandoned buildings, deserted sheds, attics and other places where they won't encounter humans.

image: University of NebraskaLincoln Extension



Raccoon and opossum tracks

Raccoons appear to be solitary though they live in a community called a gaze. Mating season for Raccoons is February through March with a two-month gestation. Litters, often called nurseries, range from 1 to 8 kits with an average litter of 4. They are nursed by their mothers for 8 to 10 weeks and weaned by 16 weeks. The young remain with their mothers and litter mates for up to 9 months after which they leave the den to become independent. Raccoons that live in the wild live an average of 2 to 5 years with some living up to 10 years. Their lifespan is heavily dependent on their interaction with humans, and many succumb to traffic accidents, hunting and trapping.

Raccoons have a highly active metabolism and are constantly in search of food. They travel widely, often across distances of 100 to 250 acres, following their acute sense of smell. They are omnivorous and opportunistic, helping with vermin control by routing out prolific field mice, voles and moles.

The Bad - The Raccoon is highly intelligent, adaptive and learns new ways to find food. Then, they teach their newly learned skills to their young, improving their intelligence as a species across generations. In their frenzied search for food, they can be destructive marauders ravaging corn fields, killing chickens, attacking and decimating vegetable gardens and upending compost bins. In urban areas, they are famous for their antics by devouring the contents of overturned garbage cans, dumpster diving and eating pet food left outside, along with the contents of bird feeders. To control their misadventures, it is important to cut off their food supply by securing trash cans with tight lids or bungee cords or moving them indoors at night, bringing the unconsumed pet food indoors and eliminating other food attractors by keeping areas around bird feeders clean and tidy. Farmers resort to using wire mesh fencing to keep the creatures out of the corn fields and often stake the individual corn plants to keep them out of reach. They also use dog chases, which are legal in all seasons in Virginia, to discourage raccoons from destroying vast acres of corn. In extreme cases, there is a designated hunting season outside of Fairfax County, between mid-October and March, when it is legal to shoot raccoons.

The Ugly - The Raccoon is a target species for Rabies, and they are now the primary vector for human exposure to the disease in Virginia. They acquire the disease by eating infected animals. Rabies is a neurotropic disease that resides in the host's nervous tissues spreading the disease to other animals through saliva, mucous membranes or open wounds. It is 100 percent fatal to infected raccoons and to humans who are attacked, scratched or bitten by a rabid raccoon. Survival is rare even though there is a treatment plan of Post Exposure Prophylaxis (PEP) often used for infected humans. Given the proximity of humans and raccoons in urban areas, it is now possible to meet a rabid raccoon. For this reason, it is highly critical to recognize this potential health threat and to avoid any raccoon that is foaming at the mouth, acting overtly aggressive, having difficulty walking or appearing to be lethargic. In this case, leave the animal alone and seek help from a licensed, professional animal control officer. It is of utmost importance to have all pets, especially those who spend time outdoors, regularly vaccinated for Rabies to prevent any spread of the disease from pets to humans.

Although it is a favorite stuffed toy, the wild Raccoon can never be a cuddly friend to humans. Steer clear of them by remembering the good, the bad and the ugly.

References

- [Managing Human-Wildlife Interactions: Raccoons \(Procyon lotor\)](#), Virginia Cooperative Extension
- [Raccoons](#), Fairfax County Government
- [Rabies Fact Sheet](#), Virginia Tech Office of Research and Innovation