

Raccoons¹

William H. Kern, Jr.²

Biology

The raccoon, or simply "coon", is one animal that most people are well-acquainted with. They are found commonly in every one of the lower 48 States, in much of southern Canada and throughout Mexico and Central America. Raccoons are very adaptable animals and thrive in all kinds of habitats from the desert southwest to tropical forests and northern hardwoods. Unlike many wildlife, raccoons also do especially well in urban areas.

Raccoons are found statewide in Florida in ever-increasing numbers. Urbanization and agriculture often help their population because food often becomes more available in these conditions. Therefore, it is not at all uncommon to encounter raccoons near your home or neighborhood.

There is no mistaking a raccoon for any other animal. Its stout, bear-like body, prominent black mask and heavily furred, ringed tail all are distinctive. Adult raccoons are about 2 to 3 feet long (including their 10-inch tail) and weigh anywhere from 10 to 30 pounds. Larger animals sometimes are recorded, but Florida raccoons tend to be smaller than those farther north. Their color generally is a grizzled

salt-and-pepper gray and black with a light belly. Often the "white" hairs are noticeably yellowish. Both all-black and all-white animals sometimes occur.

Raccoons are active mostly during the evening hours. On most days, they leave their den soon after dusk and are active until morning. It is not unusual, however, for them to linger in their den well past nightfall, and during particularly nasty weather they may not venture out at all.

Individual raccoons normally use a home range of 1 to 3 square miles and are somewhat territorial, especially the males. Raccoons seen in small groups most likely are females with young or unassociated adults from neighboring territories brought together by a large food source. Where food is plentiful, raccoons may travel more than a mile from their home range to feed. They also will tolerate severe reductions in territory size. Raccoon densities of 100 per square mile can be attained around abundant food sources.

Raccoons are not fussy about their choice of food. Although classified as a carnivore, the raccoon eats as much or more plant as animal matter during

-
1. This document is WEC-34, one of a series of the Wildlife Ecology and Conservation Department, Florida Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida. Original publication date June 1991. Revised September 2002. Reviewed September 2002 and August 2009. Visit the EDIS Web site at <http://edis.ifas.ufl.edu>.
 2. William H. Kern, Jr., Ph.D., urban wildlife specialist, Department of Wildlife Ecology and Conservation, Pinellas County, Largo, FL. Cooperative Extension Service, Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences, University of Florida, Gainesville, 32611.

The Institute of Food and Agricultural Sciences (IFAS) is an Equal Opportunity Institution authorized to provide research, educational information and other services only to individuals and institutions that function with non-discrimination with respect to race, creed, color, religion, age, disability, sex, sexual orientation, marital status, national origin, political opinions or affiliations. U.S. Department of Agriculture, Cooperative Extension Service, University of Florida, IFAS, Florida A. & M. University Cooperative Extension Program, and Boards of County Commissioners Cooperating. Millie Ferrer, Interim Dean

the year. When fruits, acorns, vegetables and seeds are ripe and available, they will feed heavily on them. At other times and places they will specialize in eggs, insects, crayfish, frogs, fish and small mammals. They'll eat dead animals that they encounter; they'll raid bird feeders and pet food bowls when they're kept full; and they'll check out garbage cans that aren't secured.

Raccoons also are not fussy about their living quarters. Under normal conditions, they usually select a den in a hollow tree, usually a large limb instead of the trunk. Dens in trees may be anywhere from ground level to 60 feet above ground. In urban and other areas where tree dens are lacking, raccoons choose a wide variety of "cavities" including rock and debris piles, attics, crawl spaces beneath mobile homes, culverts and sewer drains.

Breeding occurs first when they are one year old. Normally, one litter is born each year. In Florida, this generally occurs in March and April. Litters average about 3 to 4 young, though as many as 7 have been recorded. Newborn raccoons' eyes remain closed until about 20 days old, they are weaned at 10 to 12 weeks, and the offspring may stay with their mother until they are 10 months old.

Raccoons have few enemies other than man. A few are killed by predators such as bobcats and horned owls, but the overall numbers are insignificant. Automobiles likely kill more.

The greatest problem with raccoons is disease. Raccoons are known to carry a wide variety of diseases. Most of these are harmless to them and to people, but a few, such as distemper, can kill raccoons when their populations get too dense. These diseases also can infect pets that are not vaccinated. Rabies is another such disease. The risk of rabies is small (less than 1 out of 200 raccoons in the wild have been exposed to rabies), but the risk should never be taken lightly. Raccoons are wild animals and should never be treated as pets.

Solving Raccoon Problems

Raccoons are one of our most successful urban animals and are therefore frequently observed in our yards and around our homes. This should not, by

itself, be cause for alarm. Under most conditions, raccoons are harmless, interesting neighbors. Treated as part of the natural community, you will occasionally get a glimpse of one going about its business, and these can be fascinating times. Problems with raccoons often arise because we find it so difficult not to "do something" for them.

Feeding raccoons is one such case. Because they eat just about everything imaginable, raccoons are almost never in danger of starving--especially in Florida's mild climate. Even in urban landscapes, raccoons find plenty to eat. By putting food out for them, we condition them to lose their "respect" for people--a trait that aids greatly in their ability to survive. It also causes local populations to become denser than the habitat can adequately support. At these times, raccoons begin to look more closely at your home to provide them shelter and they are more likely to become ill and to transmit diseases.

Types of Problems

Raccoon problems are varied, but most can be divided into 2 major categories. Both of these are discussed in detail in the following sections.

Feeding

Raccoons often become a nuisance by their feeding habits. When this occurs, your best strategy is to prevent their access to this food wherever possible. If raccoons are raiding your pet's food dish, feed your pet during daylight hours and remove the uneaten food before dusk. If raccoons are raiding your garbage can, then make this can inaccessible. Get a raccoon-proof garbage can or weight the lid down so that they can't open it. Keep your garbage cans in the garage or build a bin with a latchable lid to store them in.

Eating Crops

Many other raccoon feeding problems, however, are not as easily solved and are not directly tied to feeding them. Everyone who has ever tried to grow sweet corn and other vegetables with a raccoon in the area has likely lost a good share of their potential harvest. Raccoons can be quite frustrating to fruit and vegetable growers. Solving these problems can be

equally frustrating. Be aware that repellents of any kind (and, yes, that includes mothballs) and scare devices will not be successful. No raccoon in the world will pass up the opportunity to dine on something ripe and delicious simply because there is a strange odor or object nearby. One method that will work is to prevent access and, where possible, the best of these is an electric fence. A single strand, solar-powered electric fence with the wire 8 inches above the ground can do wonders to keep raccoons out while not harming them in the least. The only other method is to remove the animal from your yard by means of a live trap.

Living in the attic (or elsewhere in the house)

Perhaps the greatest problem with raccoons occurs when they set up housekeeping inside your residence. Raccoons often come into an attic or crawl space when an entry point to the outside is not repaired, either through neglect or by failing to notice it. Torn screens or soffits, open chimneys or broken windows are common entry points. They also may take up residence beneath your mobile home or deck. Once a raccoon has moved in, it is difficult to cause it to leave. Chasing the animal out somehow and then sealing off the entry hole will, almost always, not work because the raccoon will return and force its way back in again. At this point, it will cause more damage than it did before. Physically removing the nuisance raccoon with a live trap generally is the best solution to this problem.

Control Techniques

Live-trapping

Check your local ordinances before attempting to solve your raccoon problem by using a live trap. If you are legally able to release the trapped raccoon, you also will want to determine where it would be legal to release it and obtain permission beforehand. The release site should be at least three miles from your property or the raccoon likely will return. Raccoons that are causing property damage may be live-trapped without a permit from the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (GFC), but if the raccoon is to be taken away from your property and released a permit is required.

Setting a live trap to remove a problem raccoon is relatively easy, but to achieve the desired results you've got to set it correctly. Traps always should be set where they can be monitored easily. Never place the trap in an attic or under a mobile home unless it's absolutely necessary and you can check it at least daily. It is far preferable to put the trap in the raccoon's normal path of travel or in an open place where it is known to be feeding.

Bait the trap either with something that it is currently feeding on or with something that will surely tempt it. This is not too difficult because raccoons will eat virtually everything. In most cases, a dry cat food that includes fish meal is an inexpensive, non-messy, excellent choice. Raccoons can be very easy to lure into a trap, but at other times they are exceptionally frustrating. Try switching baits if the raccoon will not enter your trap after the first 3 or 4 nights. Chicken necks, an ear of sweet corn or whole peanuts are some of the varied foods that might tempt your problem animal. If switching baits does not produce results, you will have to reduce the raccoon's fear of the trap. Wire the door of the trap open so it cannot fall shut. Then place bait both inside the trap and around the outside. After a few days, the raccoon probably will begin to enter the trap to feed. Once it is doing this regularly, you can unwire the door.

One final consideration is your choice of trap. Although there are many brands of live traps, they all work much the same. One difference, even among the same brand, is the number of doors available. When trapping raccoons, traps that open at only one end are preferable than those that open at both ends. If you are using a two-door trap, consider closing one of the doors and locking it down, thus making it a one-door trap. This forces the raccoon to go all the way to the back of the trap to reach the bait and ensure that it will be trapped when the door is triggered.

Because relocated raccoons may spread disease to the resident raccoon population and because they frequently cause other problems, it is recommended that live-trapped raccoons be humanely killed. In fact, in many regions of Florida it is now illegal to release live-trapped raccoons.

Other Control Methods

Raccoons are protected by various rules administered by GFC. It is legal to kill a nuisance raccoon if you hold a valid hunting license when it is done by a humane method. The use of poisons is not legal without a permit and are not recommended for raccoons. Check local ordinances before using any lethal control method.