

Wildlife Notes

The Raccoon -- Friend or Foe?

The raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) is an important link in nature's food web. Raccoons are also beneficial to humans because of their consumption of pesky insects and mice, their aesthetic qualities, and their fur. They are an enjoyable and lovable animal; however, they can cause damage and pose health problems to animals and humans. This publication describes precautions that you can take to avoid potential raccoon problems.

Habits and Habitats

Wherever both year-round food and den sites abound, raccoons can be found. The range of the raccoon covers most of the U.S., except for desert areas and some dense forests. Because of its adaptability, it is found in a range of habitats from fields and farmlands to wetlands and suburban areas. This nocturnal (active at night) mammal likes to feed on crayfish, frogs, insects, clams, small mammals, birds and their eggs, turtle eggs, and a wide range of fruits and nuts.

This makes it an omnivore--a feeder of both plant and animal matter. Garbage and pet food may comprise a significant portion of its diet in urban and suburban areas. Hollow trees, rock crevices, and rock piles provide good den sites for raccoons. They also use hollow logs or abandoned animal burrows in the winter. Raccoons mate during the winter and have one litter (of 2 to 5 young) per year with birth occurring in the spring.



Photo and track credit: New Hampshire Fish and Game Dept.

The raccoon is easily identified by its characteristic black mask over the eyes, ringed tail, and hunched back profile.

<u>Damage</u>	<u>Control</u>
Raccoons can cause problems by:	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> defacing property and contaminating areas with their droppings (scat); 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discourage raccoons from living in and around your home and out-buildings. Seal off openings where they can enter, use fencing around chicken coops, and cap or screen chimneys. Check periodically for signs of raccoon presence. Seek professional advice before attempting to clean out raccoon droppings from an area and wash your hands well after contact with contaminated areas.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> posing a health hazard to humans and other animals (see table); 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Secure your garbage can lid to the can with a bungee cord, or construct a shed large enough to fit the garbage can(s) inside and attach a lock.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> raiding garbage cans and pet food; 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not leave pet food out.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> making a meal of corn crops and poultry; and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use electrified wire (electrified by a commercial charger) to exclude raccoons from your garden or commercial crops.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> preying on the nests of ground and shrub-nesting birds such as warblers, thrushes, and vireos. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Do not adopt raccoons (or other wild animals) as pets.

The tracks of the animal are distinctive, showing five toes on the front and hind feet. Claw marks can usually be seen. The front track measures approx. 2½" in length - the hind track measures approx. 4" in length.



Raccoon scat tends to be granular in appearance, even in diameter, and not tapered at the ends (not to scale).



Common Questions	Rabies	Roundworm (<i>Baylisascaris procyonis</i>)
What is it?	Rabies is a deadly viral infection. All mammals including humans can get rabies. Animals most often infected include raccoons, skunks, foxes, bats, and woodchucks.	Roundworm is a potentially dangerous parasite commonly found in the small intestine of raccoons. The larvae invade tissues of humans and other animals.
How can I be infected?	By: 1) an animal bite; or 2) saliva, brain, or spinal cord tissue of a rabid animal entering a wound, eyes, nose, or mouth (you do not have to be bitten to become infected).	By accidentally ingesting roundworm eggs (shed in raccoon droppings) from contaminated areas. Adult humans can probably ingest a few eggs and suffer no symptoms. If, however, large numbers of eggs are ingested, severe central nervous system damage, eye damage, or even death can result.
How can I prevent infection?  <i>Do not feed wild raccoons!</i>	Do not touch or pick up live or dead wild animals. Ensure that your pets and livestock are vaccinated against rabies. Do not allow pets to roam freely, day or night. If your pet has been bitten or had contact with a potentially rabid animal, wear gloves while handling your pet and contact your veterinarian for further instructions. (In addition, use measures listed on reverse side under "Control".)	Small children are particularly vulnerable because they will put almost anything into their mouths. Children should be taught to recognize raccoon latrine areas and should not be allowed to play in or near them. These areas typically occur at the base of trees, on fallen logs, large rocks, and woodpiles, and in barns (especially haylofts) and other outbuildings. By observing a few common sense rules, the chances of becoming infected with the parasite can be effectively limited (follow suggestions listed on reverse side under "Control")
What should I do if exposed?	DO NOT wait for symptoms to appear. Rabies is fatal when it reaches that stage. Wash the exposed area with soap and water for at least 10 minutes. Call your doctor and local health department immediately. There is no need to panic. Vaccinations for rabies (which are received in the arm) are completely effective.	Assess the risk of infection (ingestion of eggs). Seek medical advice and let the practitioner know (especially for an eye or nervous system problem) that infection by roundworm may be a possibility.

Abnormal behavior such as appearing sick or disoriented may be a sign of rabies or distemper infection. However, a raccoon can appear to be normal and still be a carrier of these or other diseases. Raccoons may carry salmonella, ringworm (fungus), tularemia, and also serve as host to the deer tick, which can carry lyme disease.

This publication describes some important aspects of potential raccoon problems. Please refer to the contacts listed below and in the above text for further information.

National Contact

U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services

[Centers for Disease Control](#)

Atlanta, GA

Rabies: (404) 639-1050

Roundworm: (404) 639-3534

or

Purdue University (317) 494-7556

For references and sources of information, contact: Toni McLellan at (603) 868-7690

Prepared by: Toni McLellan and Mary Torsello, USDA Forest Service, State & Private Forestry, Northeastern Area, P.O. Box 640, Durham, NH 03824-0640