



EC 1566 • September 2004  
\$1.00

# Raccoon

*Procyon lotor*

by T. Norris and S. Sells



**R**accoons are very interesting animals to watch because many of their motions remind us of things we do. Raccoons walk flat footed like humans, and their front paws work a lot like human hands. Their ability to open doors, refrigerators, and garbage cans causes many conflicts between humans and raccoons.

The scientific name for raccoon is *Procyon lotor*. The species term *lotor* means

“washer.” The common name raccoon comes from the Algonquin Indian term for “one who scratches with his hands.” Raccoons were given this name because they seem to wash their food in water before they eat it. Even when there is no water, raccoons still go through the motion of washing their food. This behavior most likely serves to soften food items and remove dirt and sand that is hard on the animal’s teeth.

Raccoons have adapted well to living around people, so we frequently see them in the evening or spy their tracks in soft mud near a creek. They are cute and may be curious about you, but be careful as raccoons are wild animals and can carry diseases or be aggressive if provoked. Raccoons are fun to watch but can be a real challenge if they discover your property has a handy food source. These intelligent animals will test even the most complex methods for keeping them out of your pet food containers or garbage.

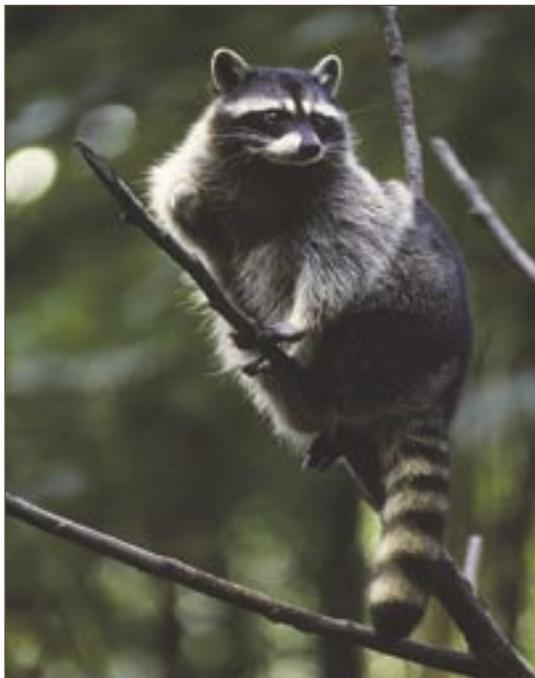


Photo: Corel Corporation

Raccoons like to live in places where there are trees.

*Tara Norris and Sarah Sells, students in Fisheries and Wildlife, Oregon State University.*



## Species description

Raccoons are medium-sized mammals. Including their tail, they usually are just less than 3 feet long. Adult raccoons weigh between 12 and 48 pounds.

The body of a raccoon normally is gray and black, with a little bit of brown. A common characteristic of raccoons is the black mask across their eyes, surrounded by white. They also have gray and black rings around their tail.

Raccoons generally are the most common medium-sized wild animals in urban areas. Raccoons are grouped as omnivores (they eat meat, plants, and many other things), and they are not picky eaters. They survive well in urban areas, where there always is trash and other food left over from humans.

Raccoons are primarily nocturnal (they are more active at night), so they can be hard to view. You are more likely to see their tracks or the damage they have caused during the night.



Illustration: Cindie Brunner

Raccoons are active year round. Although they don't hibernate, they

do store up fat, are less active, and live in dens most of the winter. During the day, raccoons generally like to sleep on the ground, but some choose tree branches or cavities. Raccoons sleep alone or in small family groups.

Raccoons give birth to their young in April to May. They usually have three or four young in a litter, but can have as few as one and as many as seven. The young weigh about 3 ounces at birth and are mostly hairless. After 1 week, their hair grows in, and after about 20 days, their eyes open. The mother removes her young from the den when they are about 2 months old and may move them several times before they begin accompanying her on their own at about 4 months of age. A few weeks later, they are closer to being independent. During winter of that year, the family may still den together or remain close to one another.





## Where they live and why

Raccoons live nearly everywhere in the United States except for very high elevations in the Rocky Mountains and dry desert areas in central Nevada, Utah, and Arizona. In Oregon, they can be found everywhere except the very high mountains and desert regions.

Raccoons like to live in areas with water and trees. Some of their favorite foods are found in or near water, including crawfish, clams, frogs, and worms. They also like fruits, seeds, berries, insects, and garbage. Raccoons like to have trees in their habitat and often choose trees with cavities where they can sleep during the day.



Photo: Corel Corporation

*Raccoons find some of their favorite foods in water—crawfish, clams, frogs, and worms.*

## Creating habitat



Raccoons prefer habitat that has water, trees, shrubs, and places for dens, such as hollow logs, cavities in snags, or rock crevices. When creating wildlife habitat, raccoons are one type of wildlife you may want to discourage instead of attract. They are so well adapted to urban life they may quickly take up residence if you feed them. These wild animals are very good at taking care of themselves and feeding them may cause them to lose their fear of humans and develop aggressive

behavior. Instead, focus on looking for signs, such as tracks or scat (droppings) that raccoons have stopped by for a visit.

Another reason not to feed or go near a raccoon is because of the diseases they carry. Raccoons can have rabies, roundworms, and canine distemper. These diseases can be very dangerous to you and your pets. Never try to handle a raccoon!

Despite these things, raccoons can be great fun to watch. They are very smart animals that have adapted well to populated areas, so even if you live in the most urban area, it is quite likely that you have resident raccoons for neighbors.

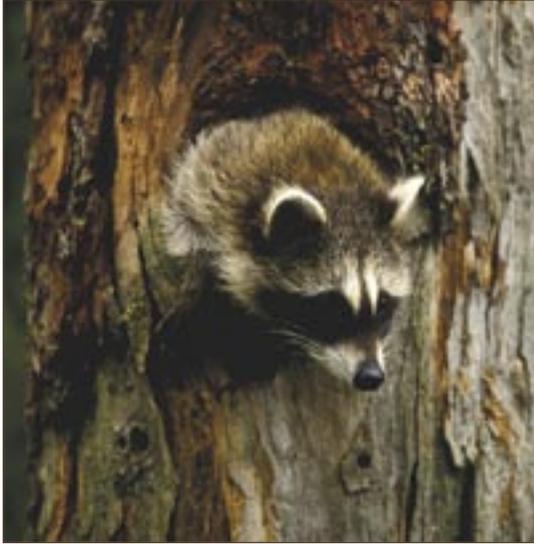


Photo: Corel Corporation

Raccoons like to make their homes in cavities in trees.

## Fun facts

-  Raccoons weigh only 2 to 3 ounces when they are born.
-  Raccoons can climb down trees head first by turning their back feet around 180 degrees.
-  The largest raccoon ever recorded weighed 60 pounds.
-  The top speed raccoons can run is 15 mph.
-  Raccoons are great swimmers.

## Learn more!

Csuti, Blair, et al. 1997. *Atlas of Oregon Wildlife*. Oregon State University Press, Corvallis.

Knopf, Alfred A. 1996. *National Audubon Society Field Guide to Mammals, North America*. Chanticleer Press, Inc., New York, NY.

Maser, Chris. 1998. *Mammals of the Pacific Northwest, From the Coast to the High Cascades*. Oregon State University Press, Corvallis.

Verts, B.J. and Leslie N. Carraway. 1998. *Land Mammals of Oregon*. University of California Press, Berkeley.



Additional wildlife publications in this series are available on the OSU Extension Service website at <http://extension.oregonstate.edu> (choose "Publications").

© 2004 Oregon State University.

Raccoon track illustrations are used courtesy of Kim A. Cabrera.

This publication was produced and distributed in furtherance of the Acts of Congress of May 8 and June 30, 1914. Extension work is a cooperative program of Oregon State University, the U.S. Department of Agriculture, and Oregon counties. Oregon State University Extension Service offers educational programs, activities, and materials—without discrimination based on race, color, religion, sex, sexual orientation, national origin, age, marital status, disability, or disabled veteran or Vietnam-era veteran status. Oregon State University Extension Service is an Equal Opportunity Employer.

Published September 2004.