

Common Raccoon

Procyon lotor



Other common names

Northern raccoon, North American raccoon,

Introduction

Raccoons are well-known as the masked bandits who get into your garbage or steal your pet's food. The particularly successful ones become quite plump as a result of their thievery. This intelligent and adaptable mammal has adjusted quite well to living alongside humans, to the point that raccoon densities may be higher in urban environments than those in more natural settings.

Physical Description and Anatomy

Raccoons are a medium sized mammal, with a well-rounded, plump appearance. They have reddish brown to grey fur, with alternating grey and black rings on their bushy tail. Some of their most identifiable features are the black markings across their face that make raccoons look as if they're wearing masks. They have a pointed snout, black nose, white whiskers, and erect, pointed ears.

Adult raccoons average 15 lbs (6.8 kg), but well-fed individuals may reach 30 lbs (13.6 kg). They measure 24 – 38 inches (61.0 – 96.5 cm) from nose to tail, and the tail may be 1/3 of that length. They have very dexterous front paws with 5 toes that resemble human hands. Each toe is tipped with a sharp claw, enabling them to climb trees.



Raccoon pelt.



Raccoon tail.

Identifying features (tracks, scat, calls)

Raccoons themselves are hard to confuse with other species because they have such distinctive markings. Their tracks may be confused with fisher or otter, which have webbed feet, or opossum, which have a larger “thumb” on the hind foot. Vocalizations include purring, twittering, hissing, snarling, and mewing.

Caution should always be used when examining raccoon scat, as it can contain parasites that, if inhaled, can cause serious illness in humans.



Raccoon tracks.

Front: $1 \frac{9}{16}$ – $3 \frac{1}{8}$ inches long
by $1 \frac{9}{16}$ – $2 \frac{7}{8}$ inches wide.

Hind: 2-4 inches long by $1 \frac{7}{16}$
– 3 inches wide



Raccoon scat.



Raccoon skull.

Habitat

The natural habitat of raccoons includes deciduous forests and woodlands. However, raccoons have adapted so well to human habitation that they can even be found in densely populated inner cities. Population estimates by the DEC show that while rural areas may have 20 – 40 raccoons per square mile, densities in urban areas may reach more than 100 individuals per square mile.

Behavior and Diet

Raccoons are nocturnal mammals, foraging at night for fruit, nuts, berries, fungi, and insects. A raccoon's dexterous front paws have a well-developed sense of touch, which assists them in their feeding activities. They are omnivorous, and will also feed on small mammals, amphibians, birds and their eggs, fish, shellfish, and carrion. Near human habitation, they feed on pet food, garden crops, garbage, and farm fowl. It is not uncommon to lose unprotected chickens and other fowl to a hungry raccoon. They are expert swimmers, and can run 10 – 15 mph (16.0 – 24.1 kph), but usually favor climbing a tree over running from predators. They are preyed upon by coyotes, bobcats, predatory birds, and wolves, and young are taken by snakes and foxes. In the wild, they generally do not live more than 6 years, but they have the ability to live to 17.

While raccoons do not hibernate, they will spend long periods in winter holed up in their dens sleeping. Raccoons den in tree cavities, abandoned burrows of other mammals, rock crevices, hollow logs, and deserted beaver lodges. They are highly adaptable, and near humans, they may take up residence in farm buildings, storm sewers, or under a porch. They will also enter homes through chimneys and pet doors in search of food.

Human Interactions

Raccoons are important to the furbearer industry. However, they are also often considered pests. They dig through garbage, get into homes, and can cause considerable damage. Raccoons have the ability to transmit a number of diseases, including rabies, canine distemper, and roundworm. Roundworm is particularly dangerous to humans, as they can become infected by handling raccoon feces, and suffer serious nerve damage and even death.

Reproduction

Raccoons mate from February to March, and females give birth in their den to a litter of 2 – 5 young in April and May, after a gestation period of about 63 days. Their eyes are closed at birth, and open at about 3 weeks. They nurse for 6 weeks, after which they begin to leave the den with the mother and learn to forage. They are fully weaned at 8 – 12 weeks, and begin dispersing in September and October to establish their own territory.

Fun Facts

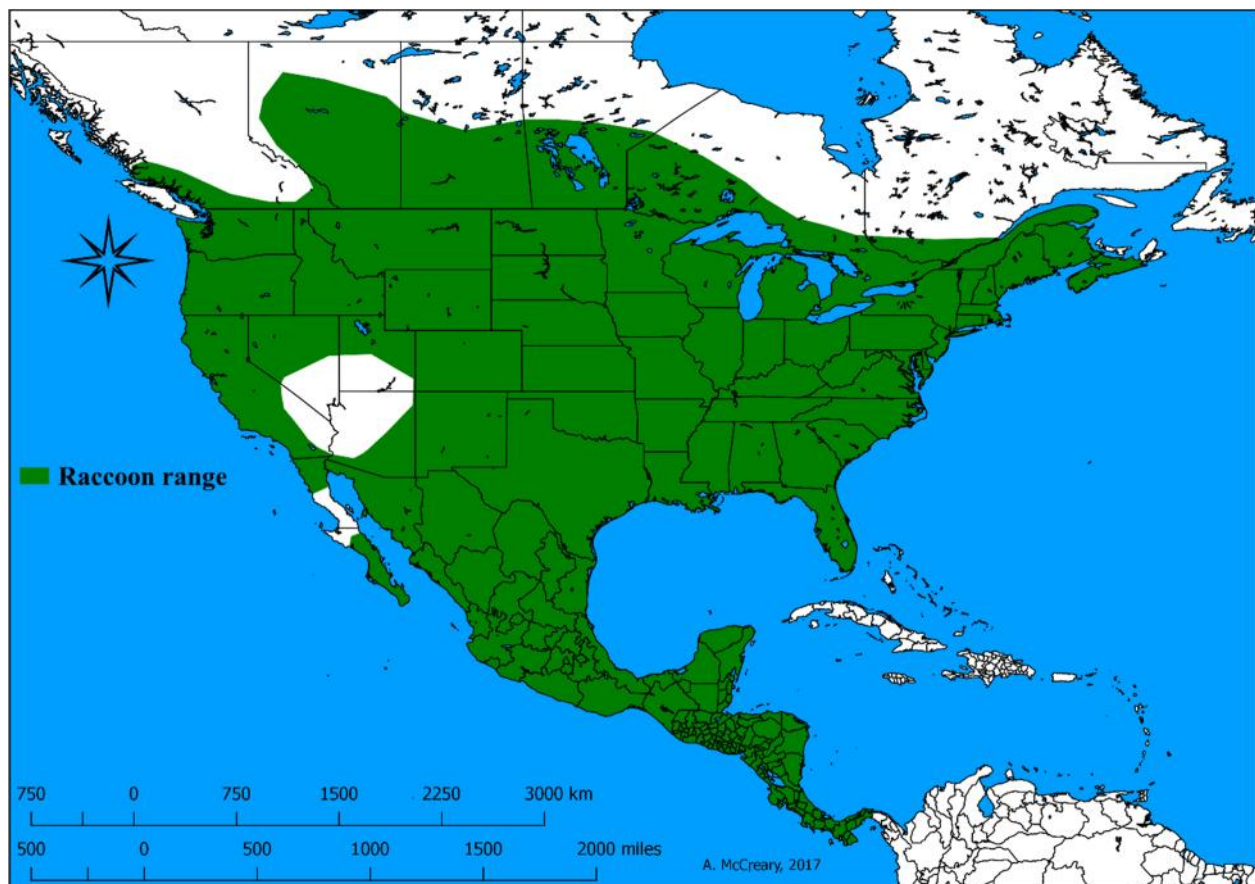
President Coolidge had a pet raccoon named Rebecca.

Raccoons have a pattern of black fur on their face that looks like a mask.

They are able to open latches, doors, and even locks with their nimble forepaws.

Range and Status

Raccoons are found throughout most of the United States, as well as parts of Canada, Mexico, and Central America. Unlike many other species, they are not threatened by habitat destruction and fragmentation as they have adapted well to living in proximity with humans.



Management and Research in New York

Raccoons are protected in New York and managed as a small game species. Ownership is only permitted with a special license, for example for those involved in environmental education or wildlife rehabilitation.

Pictures



A raccoon captured by our trail camera in 2014

At Dyken Pond

Raccoons are fairly rare around Dyken Pond. The area is sparsely populated by humans, and most raccoons in the area congregate around human habitations as an easy food source.

Sources

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