



Raccoon

Procyon lotor

May 2017

Field Notes



Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*). Suzy Whitte/FWS.

General Description

Most of us, by chance or misfortune, have encountered this masked bandit! Raccoons are medium-sized mammals in the “dog-like” suborder of carnivores (Carnivora > Caniformia). Their closest relatives, other members of New World family, Procyonidae, are mostly tropical and include ringtails (which range into SW Oregon), olingos, kinkajous, and coatis. *Procyon lotor*, the common raccoon, ranges from Canada to Panama and is the northernmost of three distinct species of raccoon. Over 20 subspecies of the common raccoon occur, including our Pacific Northwestern variety, *Procyon lotor pacificus*. *Procyon* is Latin for “dog-like” and *lotor* means “washer” for the raccoon’s characteristic habit of manipulating prey in stream water.

The largest procyonid, common raccoons measure 40 to 70 cm (16 to 28 in) long with a 15- to 40-cm-long tail. Males are larger than females, and can weigh up to 27 kg (60 lbs), but raccoons more typically range from 2.3 to 15 kg (5 to 33 lbs). They bear a white-bordered black “mask” around the eyes, a thick coat of long, grayish fur, and a cream- or orange-and-black banded tail. Raccoons have exceptionally dexterous

front paws, though they lack opposable thumbs. Because their hind legs are longer than their forelegs, they run with a characteristic loping gait. All procyonids have five toes on each foot and most walk with flat soles (except for the ringtail).

Habitat

Although raccoons are adapted to a wide range of habitats, they are most common in wetlands, damp woods, and suburban areas with nearby water sources. Trees are also important for denning, day rests, and predator escape. Their sharp claws, long digits, and ability to rotate their hind feet 180 degrees to descend trees headfirst (like squirrels and unlike cats) make them good tree climbers. Raccoons also den under logs, brush piles, large rocks, or in burrows dug by other animals.

Behavior, Diet, and Predators

Raccoons are the ultimate omnivore and highly opportunistic! They use their highly developed sense of touch—backed by a brain trained on tactile perception and sensitive “whiskers” (vibrissae) on the tips of their digits—to catch and manipulate prey. Crayfish are a favorite. Although they typically forage along streams—and are good swimmers—they also eat insects, small mammals, bird eggs and nestlings, reptile eggs, fruits, vegetables, nuts, worms, carrion, and of course, garbage. Urban raccoons can outweigh their wild cousins significantly.

Raccoons fall prey to cougars, bobcats, coyotes, dogs, and too often, automobiles. Great horned owls and other raptors prey on young raccoons.

Raccoons are nocturnal and generally quiet, except for an occasional chitter or purr. During aggressive interactions or courtship, however, they emit high-pitched squeals, growls, and screams.

Life History

Raccoons are thought to be both polygynous (multiple female partners) and promiscuous (both males and females mate with multiple partners), depending on local population density. They breed in late winter and produce a litter of 3 to 7 “kits” after two months of gestation. The young stay with their mother until fall or sometimes the next spring. Raccoons live an average of 2 to 3 years in the wild, though captive raccoons have lived over 20 years.

Human Interactions

Raccoons are still hunted as game and trapped for fur. They are sometimes considered a pest for damaging corn crops, killing poultry, and digging through trash. Raccoon droppings are often concentrated in “latrines” under trees or bridges, or on rooftops, and can transmit potentially lethal roundworms (*Baylisascaris procyonis*) to birds and mammals (especially rodents), including humans. Raccoons can also carry rabies virus and other parasites.

Fun Facts

—Intelligence studies show that raccoons can open complex locks and remember solutions to tasks for up to three years

—US President Calvin Coolidge kept a pet raccoon named Rebecca

—A group of raccoons is called a nursery or gaze

Where to See

Raccoons occur in all Klamath Network parks and are common breeders in Redwood National and State Parks.

More Information

[NatureServe Explorer](#)

[Encyclopedia of Life](#)