

IMAGES

... then and now

From the Indian Hill Village Woodlands



Buckingham Lodge
1861

The Scoop on 'Coons

The North American raccoon ranges all over the continent and thrives in areas like Indian Hill. When first seen by Europeans, this mammal was thought to be a cross between a badger and a squirrel. The word "raccoon" comes from the Algonquin "arakun" that translates "he scratches with his hands". The scientific name is "procyon lotor", and experts have identified 25 subspecies based on color, size, and location.



Raccoons have a bushy black ringed tail and distinctive patches around their eyes that look like masks." Adults range in torso size from 18" to 22" and tail length from 8" to 12". Their average body weight is 12-35 pounds, but one 62-pounder has been documented. Their brown-black fur has been called salt and pepper, though coloration varies with locale. The under fur is dense and the guard hair on their backs is long and stiff to shed moisture. Other distinguishing characteristics are the pointed snout, white tipped ears, and unwebbed front and hind feet.

Known to be among the most intelligent mammals, they are skillful at adapting to many environments. As woodlands gave way to houses, the raccoon has learned to raid garbage cans, gardens, birdfeeders, and pet bowls. Because of their almost hand-like front paws and thin mobile fingers, they can open up latches and turn on faucets. They have a highly developed tactile sense, and often manipulate their food before consuming it.

Though classified as carnivores (meat eaters) because of their teeth structure, raccoons are omnivores, eating eggs, fish, frogs, clams, crayfish, insects, fruit, berries, nuts, vegetables, birds, young rabbits, and garbage. Raccoons are nocturnal, usually foraging from their dens after sunset. Adult males normally range about a mile in any direction, but expand their travel patterns in breeding season.

Usually breeding occurs between January and March, with the promiscuous male not active in the rearing of the cubs. Gestation is about 9 weeks, and litter size is about 3 to 6 cubs. The litter is born in a sheltered den, often a hollow log or tree; and the cubs remain with their mother throughout the summer. This family group remains intact for about a year. Normal life span in the wild is 6 to 10 years, but mortality claims some raccoons earlier. Major causes of early death include traffic collisions, disease, and harvest by hunters or trappers.

As recently as the 1960's raccoons were hunted in Redbird Hollow. A tenant farmer for one of the large estates was fond of the sport. He and his coonhound escorted local youngsters to the Hollow where the group would wait in the cold night air until alerted by a yelp from the dog. Following the sound of the yelp, the hunters awaited a higher pitched yelp (indicating the raccoon was up in a tree). Flashlights in hands, they located the eyes of the coon and shot it out of the tree, whereupon the coonhound finished off his prey. Afterwards the tenant farmer skinned the coon, saving its fur and tail. Current law prohibits any hunting in the village, and raccoons are commonplace.

These masked bandits can be a nuisance when they raid homeowners' property, but some nature lovers enjoy observing the antics of these animals. At least one village family constructed a feeding station in the yard for raccoons, and took great satisfaction in watching them. Indian Hill is home to many raccoons, resourceful survivors for centuries and one of the many creatures of the wild in Village woodlands.