

Raccoon



Raccoons are familiar animals with masked faces and ringed tails. They have five toes on both the front and hind feet. Their long, dexterous fingers enable them to open latches, untie knots, turn doorknobs, and open jars. Their prints look like tiny human baby handprints and footprints.

Raccoons prefer wooded areas near water and in natural habitats. They den in hollow trees, ground burrows, brush piles, or rock crevices. This nocturnal animal adapts extremely well to urban and suburban environments, where it often dens in backyards, beneath decks, or in accessible outbuildings. Attics, chimneys, and the spaces beneath houses are also used as dens if access can be gained. Because they are active mostly at nighttime, raccoons are often present but may go undetected for some time.

Raccoons are omnivorous, eating both plants and animals. Plant foods include all kinds of fruits, berries, nuts, acorns, corn, and other types of grain. Animal foods include crayfish, clams, fish, frogs, snails, insects, turtles, rabbits, muskrats, and the eggs and young of ground-nesting birds, including waterfowl. In urban settings, in addition to feeding on backyard fruits, nuts, and vegetables, they scavenge from garbage cans and compost piles. Pet food left outside overnight ranks high as a food resource and then, of course, some people deliberately provide food for raccoons.



Young are generally born in April or May, but earlier and later litters are not uncommon. Litter size ranges from three to six young, averaging about four. Family groups usually remain together for the first year; the year-old young begin to assert their independence the following year when the new litter arrives. Because of the availability of food and den sites, urban and suburban raccoon populations can become very large.

Their tracks are commonly found near water. Where you find water, you find mud, which is an excellent medium for studying tracks. The hind feet in the picture on the left sunk deeper into the mud due to the heavier hind end of the raccoon's body. It is widely believed that raccoons always "wash" their food. This is not true. They exhibit a behavior called "dabbling" in which they dunk their food in water. This helps enhance their sense of touch and helps them find food underwater by feeling with their sensitive fingers. It also enables them to sort out items that are not edible.



During cold weather, raccoons will sleep for several days, but do not hibernate.

Raccoon scat is tubular and blunt on the ends. Scat may contain parasites that can get into human lungs, so handling it is not advisable.

Raccoons are well known for their curiosity and mischievousness.