

# NUISANCE ANIMALS

## RACCOON

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### BACKGROUND

The North American Raccoon is one of the largest members of the **Procyonid** family which can reach a weight of between ten and twenty pounds. Two characteristics unique to the raccoon are its extremely dexterous front paws with five fingers that look and act like hands, and its very distinctive facial mask reminding one of a bandit. The hyper-sensitive front paws give rise to the raccoon's most important sensory perception, or the ability to identify objects merely through touch. Raccoons are extremely intelligent, enough so that they can easily open garbage cans and unlock doors. Usually nocturnal, opportunistic and omnivorous, they can eat a variety of plants, insects and small mammals, although they prefer fruit and nuts. In the spring, females give birth to two to five "kits" after a gestation period of 63-65 days. The kits are weaned at 16 weeks, but will stay under the mother's protection until the fall, and sometimes throughout the winter if weather conditions are extremely harsh.

A raccoon in captivity can live up to 20 years, but in the wild their life expectancy is only 2-3 years due to car accidents, disease and hunting. Almost 50% of raccoons in their first year do not survive due to starvation, the severity of weather conditions, infectious diseases such as distemper, or succumbing to natural predators such as bobcats, coyotes, or great horned owls who prey on the young. In colder climates, raccoons may go into a sort of winter hibernation or rest period for several weeks until snow no longer covers its food sources. Raccoons like to climb when they feel threatened, so they mainly look for areas like tree hollows or rock piles where they can hide.

The raccoon can be found in most of the United States except for parts of the Rocky Mountains, central Nevada, Utah and Arizona. It is also found in southern Canada and from Mexico to northern South America. Raccoons have adapted to living in suburban areas due to plentiful food sources in gardens and garbage cans, and due to an abundance of safe sleeping areas in garages and attics.

As with all wildlife, raccoons should not be approached or handled by humans. One reason for leaving raccoons undisturbed is their susceptibility to numerous diseases including canine distemper and parvovirus, in addition to zoonotic diseases that may infect humans such as rabies and raccoon roundworms. Even though raccoons may be carriers of rabies, not all raccoons have rabies. Typically, rabid raccoons will exhibit aimless wandering and lack of coordination, or they will exhibit aggressive behavior that can include attacks and self-mutilation.

## NUISANCE REPUTATION

Because of their adaptability to different habitats and destruction of their natural habitat, raccoons often become a nuisance in urban and suburban areas, around rural homes and in recreation areas. One of the most common conflicts between raccoons and humans occurs when household pets are fed outside. Raccoons are attracted to pet foods and can often congregate in large numbers to take advantage of this easily obtained food source. Raccoons can also become a nuisance by making a den in garages and attics, by raiding gardens, or by opening garbage cans in search of food.

## GEORGIA LAW

In April 2015, Governor Deal signed House Bill 160, allowing recreational **steel trapping** of raccoons throughout the entire state of Georgia. Previously, **O.C.G.A. § 27-1-2 (31)** restricted the hunting and trapping of fur bearing animals from Dec 1 to February 29, restricted steel trapping in certain counties, and allowed any resident to apply for a free permit to trap raccoons they believed to be sick, harmful to crops, or other property. Now, however, steel trapping is unrestricted and legal in all counties, including DeKalb, Fulton and Gwinnet.

Steel trapping is an extremely cruel method to kill any animal. One in four raccoons caught in the trap actually gnaw off their limb trying to escape. But hunters and trappers falsely believe that trapping reduces the number of rabid raccoons and protects the public. However, using steel traps simply reduces the number of healthy animals, leaving sick and rabid animals in the wild who are not attracted to food baits in traps. Steel traps also catch non-target wildlife such as endangered or threatened species as well as companion animals in a cruel, gruesome and inhumane method.

Nuisance problems are best dealt with by changing or removing food sources, or excluding raccoons from human structures and garbage containers. Raccoons should never be fed intentionally. Relief of nuisance problems can be alleviated through contract with a permitted nuisance trapper, or now, by legally trapping and killing them.

## REFERENCES

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*Credit to Kaye Klapper*