



Raccoon

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Procyon lotor

The raccoon, often referred to simply as a “coon,” is a common mammal found throughout Alabama and the United States except for the Rocky Mountains and deserts of the Southwest.

DESCRIPTION

Raccoons are medium-sized and stocky-built animals (23 to 46 inches long) with long bushy tails that have five to seven black rings. The head is broad in the rear and narrows to a short, pointed nose. The feet have hairless soles and claws that are nonretractable.

Raccoons are similar to humans in that they are plantigrade, a term used to describe animals that walk on the soles of their feet. The front feet have long, thin flexible fingers that are opposable to some degree and are very sensitive to touch. They have the capability of grasping or holding onto food or other objects. The face has a very noticeable black mask across the eyes and cheeks that are outlined with white. The fur is a coarse gray, brown, and black with lighter shades on the sides.

HABITAT

Raccoons inhabit areas such as bottomland hardwoods, swamps, pine/hardwood forest, farmlands, wooded residential areas in cities and towns, and other areas that

have a supply of den areas, food and water. Den areas can be found in hollow trees, rock crevices, under tree roots, and burrows of other animals. They are relatively scarce in dry upland woodlands and southern pine forests.

DIET

Raccoons are omnivorous and opportunistic feeders. They will feed on plant material such as wild fruits, berries, acorns, nuts, corn and garden vegetables. Their diet also includes insects, crayfish, frogs, fish, bird and turtle eggs, snakes and small mammals. In urban areas and city parks they will also forage in trash cans and garbage dumps.

REPRODUCTION

Raccoons begin to mate as early as December to as late as August, with a peak in the mating season around February and March. The gestation period is 63 days and most young are born between April and August. Females can have one to seven young per year with an average of three to four. The young are weaned and begin to leave the nest to forage on their own at the age of 10 to 12 weeks. Females are able to breed at about one year of age and males not until their second year.

ADAPTABILITY

Due to its adaptability, the raccoon is able to use urban and suburban areas as habitats. Because they are seldom seen during the daytime, urban populations may be underestimated. When garbage cans are overturned or pet food is missing, the culprit may be a raccoon. To avoid feeding wild animals like raccoons, don't leave pet food out at night.

Raccoons can carry rabies, a lethal disease of the nervous system usually transmitted by bites. People should stay away from raccoons or other animals with unusual behavior or appearance and notify the proper authorities.

CONSERVATION STATUS

Raccoons are classified as both a game species and a fur-bearer in Alabama. As such they are both hunted (most often using hounds) and trapped either as nuisance animals or for their fur, for which there is still a limited market.

FACTS ABOUT RACCOON

- ▶ Because of its facial coloring, which looks like a mask, the raccoon is often referred to as a “masked bandit.”
- ▶ For climbing down a tree headfirst, an unusual ability for a mammal of its size, a raccoon rotates its hind feet so that they point backwards.
- ▶ The raccoon's Latin name, *lotor*, means “the washer” and refers to the perceived habit of dousing food in water before eating it. Recent studies indicate that this behavior is only common in captive raccoons and seems to be a substitute for the dabbling process used in searching for prey in aquatic habitats.