

# WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

## INFORMATIONAL SERIES

### RACCOON

*Procyon lotor*



**Habitat:** Raccoons prefer wooded areas near streams, ponds and marshes but are highly adaptable and can live in close proximity to human developments and thrive in farmlands.

**Weight:** Most adults weigh 10 to 30 pounds, with males typically larger than females.

**Length:** 2 to 3 feet, including the tail.

**Food:** Raccoons are opportunistic and omnivorous. Their varied diet includes fleshy fruits, mast (especially acorns, hickory nuts and beechnuts), grains, invertebrates (particularly crayfish and insects), rodents, young rabbits, birds, bird's eggs, turtles, fish, carrion, garbage and crops such as corn.

**Identification:** The raccoon is a medium-sized mammal distinguished by a black mask across the eyes and cheeks and black rings around the bushy tail. The long, thick fur gives raccoons a typical gray-brown color, with variations ranging from sienna to silver. Other characteristics include short, pointed ears and a long, pointed snout.

**Range:** Raccoons range from Canada and throughout the United States (excluding the high elevations of the Rocky Mountains and much of the Southwest) into Mexico and Central America. They are common throughout Connecticut.

**Reproduction:** Raccoons breed in late winter or early spring; the males do not remain with the female after breeding. The young are born in April or May after a 63-day gestation period. Females produce one litter per year, with an average of four cubs per litter. The cubs are born blind, helpless and are covered with yellowish-gray fur. After 30 to 40 days, the cubs leave the den

and will travel with the female for short distances to search for food. At three to four months, the cubs begin to forage on their own.

**History in Connecticut:** Since the late 1800s, Connecticut's expanding human population has probably benefited this opportunistic species; concentrations of people provide easy access to such food sources as garbage, gardens and bird feeders. Raccoons are now abundant in both urban and rural areas throughout Connecticut.

**Interesting Facts:** Raccoons are most closely related to the dog (Canidae) and bear (Ursidae) families. They have keen senses of hearing, sight and touch, but taste and smell are less well developed. Raccoons have dexterous feet, are excellent climbers and can descend a tree head first. They are extremely strong for their size.

Raccoons are primarily nocturnal but occasionally venture out in the daytime. In late fall and winter, raccoons may "den up" during the coldest periods; however, this is not true hibernation, and they will wander out during warm spells. The den is most often in a hollow tree, but raccoons will also use hollow logs, rock crevices, brush piles, buildings and abandoned woodchuck burrows, beaver lodges or fox dens.

Generally, raccoons are not social but some pairs and families do travel together.

The raccoon has been an economically important furbearer in Connecticut due to its abundance and pelt value. Raccoons are harvested each year during the regulated hunting and trapping seasons, providing recreation for many Connecticut sportsmen and helping to control local raccoon populations.

Raccoons, especially large populations, prey on birds and their nests. In Connecticut, they often raid bluebird boxes that are not protected with predator guards. They also are problematic for herons and egrets on offshore islands where repeated predation can cause abandonment of the entire colony.

**Raccoon Rabies:** Since "raccoon rabies" reached Connecticut in March, 1991, thousands of raccoons have become infected. Other species, including dogs, cats, skunks, foxes, woodchucks and livestock, have also been infected. The following symptoms may indicate the presence of rabies, distemper or other diseases in raccoons or other mammals: unprovoked aggression, impaired movement, paralysis or lack of coordination, unusually friendly behavior and disorientation. Just because a nocturnal animal like the raccoon is active during daylight hours doesn't necessarily mean that it is sick. Raccoons often adjust their feeding schedules, especially in the spring when rearing their young. Contact with any wild or stray animal should be avoided, especially if it is behaving abnormally. Report sick or strange-acting animals to your local police, animal control officer or the DEP. For more information on rabies, contact your local health department.

Raccoons may also serve as host to a number of other disease pathogens which are transmissible to humans and domestic animals, including trichinosis, tuberculosis, round worm, infectious enteritis and coccidiosis.

**Management of Problem Raccoons:** Because of their ability to coexist with humans, raccoons can become a

nuisance when they damage gardens, raid garbage cans or inhabit human structures. They can be especially destructive on farms, where they feed heavily on crops. Because of their susceptibility to rabies, problem raccoons cannot be relocated and wildlife rehabilitators can only accept them for rehabilitation with certain restrictions. However, some raccoon problems can be controlled using preventive measures.

To deter raccoons from raiding garbage cans, several modifications can be made. Snaps can be attached to the lid and the handle can be secured to a stake driven into the ground. Placing cans in wooden bins or in the garage may also eliminate raccoon raiding problems. Some people have had success with placing ammonia directly in the can to repel raccoons.

Pet or livestock food should not be left outside where it is available to raccoons. Bird feeders should be placed away from trees or other structures that can be climbed by raccoons.

Raccoons can easily access roofs by climbing trees, downspouts, vines, or a trellis located near the house. Therefore, to prevent raccoons from entering houses, roofs and chimneys should be well-maintained. Replace loose shingles, repair any holes near the eaves of the roof and securely place a chimney cap over the chimney. Limiting the access to the roof by trimming trees and shrubs may also be helpful.

The simplest and most effective, permanent solution to the problem of raccoons living in a chimney is to cap it. However, there may be young present, depending on the time of year. If the young are old enough to climb out, cap the chimney after the raccoons have left for the night. Sometimes, a female raccoon can be encouraged to move her young to another location by the use of repellents, such as ammonia or moth balls, combined with a light and noise from a portable radio placed near the damper.

Electric fences may help to keep raccoons out of gardens. The wires must be spaced close together and close to the ground in order to be effective.

On farms, where more effective methods are needed to control a large number of animals, hunters and trappers can harvest problem animals on the property during the regulated hunting and trapping seasons or by special permit at other times of the year.



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