

## **The Very Clever Raccoon**

by Sally Cureton

An animal that is surely present in our woods, but rarely seen is the Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*). *Procyon* in Latin means “before dog” with the implication that it is not as advanced as a dog. *Lotor* means “one who washes.” The word Raccoon comes from an Algonquin word meaning “he scratches with his hands.” It was once thought that the Raccoon washed everything he ate. Scientists now believe that with their very sensitive hands, they are feeling their food, rather than seeing it. Raccoons are at least as intelligent as cats and dogs, but have much more manual dexterity and a very highly developed sense of touch. They are also quite curious and have good memories.

It is because the Raccoon is nocturnal that he is seen so infrequently. They will spend the day sleeping in a tree, a squirrel’s nest, a hollow log or even crawl spaces under buildings. As the sun goes down, it is time to wake up, start moving around and looking for food. As an omnivore, a Raccoon’s diet is quite varied, but consists primarily of fruits, vegetables, acorns, earthworms, fish and other aquatic animals. Raccoons live along streams, lakes, marshes, farmland and suburban areas. In fact, they have been able to adapt quite well to living around humans. The word that describes this adaptation process is “synanthrope”. It means a wild animal that is able to live among humans, primarily because it can tolerate a variety of habitats and foods.

The average Raccoon is about 15-20 pounds. A large male may weigh 30 pounds or more. Covered with 1-2 inch long soft fur, they will be about 2½ to 3 feet long, including a foot long tail. Their ears stand straight up and are about 1½ inches long. Raccoons make a wide variety of sounds including purrs, whimpers, snarls, growls, hisses and screams. Each paw print looks like a small human hand. With short legs and flat feet, it tends to waddle as it moves around, but can run if need be, and is an excellent swimmer. These animals can also climb a tree of any size and can come down backward or forward. There aren’t many animals that can descend headfirst. The Raccoon does this by rotating his hindfoot 180 degrees.

Their mating season runs from January through March. The male may stay with the female for a week or so after mating, but then will leave to find another female. A mature male will generally mate with several females. Gestation is about 2 months and an average litter will consist of four cubs, each weighing 3 ounces. After about 2½ weeks their eyes open and they are weaned at about 4 months. The young may remain with their mother through the winter until she sends them packing when a new litter is expected. During this time she is actually very protective of her young and will attack any predators that venture too close.

As winter approaches, Raccoons will build up a thick layer of fat, generally doubling their weight. They do not hibernate, but rest during cold spells, often sleeping soundly for days. Over the winter months, their weight will drop in half. In the wild a Raccoon will generally live for about 5 years, although in captivity they have been known to have a life span of up to 18 years. They are one of four wild animals in the United States that is a primary carrier of the rabies virus. The others are fox, skunk and bat. However, only one human death has been documented as resulting from the raccoon strain of the virus. A fun, incredibly cute animal, here in our woods.