

West Virginia Wildlife Series

A Guide to Mammals of West Virginia

Raccoon (Procyon lotor)



Volume 10

Characteristics:

The raccoon has gray to brown fur. It has a black mask around its eyes with white fur around the mask. It has a stripe that runs from its forehead to its nose and white fur around its nose. It has a bushy, ringed tail and black paws with five toes. The raccoon's paws look a little like human hands. The raccoon's toes are flexible and it is very good at grabbing, pulling things apart and holding things. The raccoon is a very good climber and can go down a tree backwards or face first! The name 'raccoon' comes from the Algonquin word 'arakun' which means "one who scratches with his hands". *Procyon lotor* translates as "washer dog".

Range:

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 fairly fixed ranges within which they use small portions for several days at a time. Their home ranges vary tremendously in size - from about 10 acres to several square miles - with most of the variation probably due to the availability of food.



Habitat:

The raccoon lives in wooded areas near water. It is very adaptable though and is also found in suburbs and cities. It usually makes its den in a tree, but it may make its home in an abandoned woodchuck burrow, a cave, barn, sewer, or even a house!

Diet:

The raccoon is [omnivorous](#) and opportunistic. Common foods include fruits, nuts berries, insects, rodents, frogs, eggs and crayfish. In some rural areas, corn is a large part of the raccoon's diet. In suburban and urban areas it often forages through trash cans for food. If water is near, the raccoon will sometimes put its food in the water and roll it around. It looks like it is washing its food, but it is not. The raccoon is softening the food and looking for foreign objects on the food.

Omnivores:

Some animals eat both plants and animals. They are **omnivores**. Omnivores include mammals like [grizzly bear](#), [striped skunk](#) and [raccoon](#) and birds like the crow, the [blue jay](#) and the woodpecker. Because they will eat plants and animals, omnivores survive well in many environments. Some omnivores, like the [raccoon](#), the [opossum](#) and the seagull have no problem adapting to living near humans. They often will dig through garbage cans, dumpsters and gardens to find food.

What did you have to eat today? If you are like most humans, you probably had meat and plants! Humans are omnivores too! Our teeth are designed to eat both meat and plants. Our front teeth help us rip into meat and bite into fruits and vegetables, and our molars help us grind up meat and chew fruits and vegetables. Many omnivorous animals also have teeth that help them eat both plants and animals.



Diseases common to raccoons:

The two illnesses most commonly associated with raccoons are distemper and rabies. Rabies, unfortunately, occurs in the eastern U.S., having spread as far west as eastern Missouri. Rabid raccoons are probably not as common as the media reports would have us believe. Distemper occurs throughout the entire range and is highly contagious. Both are fatal.

Symptoms of both diseases are similar and include difficulty walking, apparent confusion, and stoicism. Raccoons are not technically nocturnal but if you see one during the day, especially in or near a populated area, there may be cause for concern. Do not attempt to make a diagnosis yourself. Call a wildlife rehab professional if you suspect rabies or distemper.

Communication:

Raccoons are thought to have over two hundred different sounds used for communication. This creature's vocalizations are varied and include purrs, whimpers, snarls, growls, hisses, screams, and whinnies. Upon meeting, two raccoons whose territories overlap

growl, lower their heads, bare their teeth, and flatten their ears; the fur on the back of their necks and shoulders stands on end. Usually both animals back off without coming to blows.

Life Cycle:

Mating season runs January through March. A little over two months after mating, the female gives birth to a litter of between four to six young. The babies are able to stand



when they are about four to six weeks old. They are weaned at 70 days and start to hunt when they are between 9-12 weeks old. When they first come out of the den, the mother may carry them around by the neck, like a cat carries a kitten. The mother also teaches them how to hunt for food and climb trees. The mother raccoon is very protective of her young and will attack predators that come too close. Young raccoons have darker coats than mature raccoons. The babies may stay with their mother for up to a year.

Behavior:

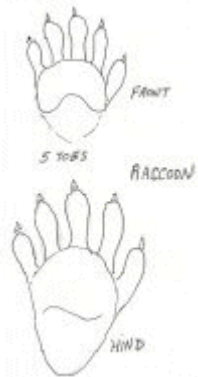
The raccoon is mostly nocturnal. It is also solitary, except for mothers and their young. In the winter the raccoon may sleep in its den for a few weeks but it does not hibernate. The raccoon usually walks, but it can run at speeds of up to 15 miles an hour. It is also a good swimmer and often hunts for food in the water. The raccoon makes a variety of vocalizations including hisses, whistles, screams, growls and snarls.

Identifying Raccoon scat:

Raccoon scat is distinctive and easy to identify. They are cylindrical and usually unsegmented, the same diameter throughout its length. Each usually untapered and flat are usually 2 to 3 inches long by up to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in diameter.

Raccoon Tracks:

The tracks of the raccoon are paired, having one rear foot beside one front one. The raccoon has five toes and usually the claw marks are evident in the print. The hind foot makes a print in which the toes and heel pad are joined whereas the front tracks toe and heel pad have a brief space between. The print vaguely resembles that of a miniature bear. Each toe has an elongated fingernail-like claw. The toes are long and fingerlike, with four pointing forward, and a shorter thumb-like toe extending to the inside, making it look very much like a human hand. Tips of the toes leave a bulbous impression just rearward of the claws.



The hind feet are flat-soled and elongated, indicating the plantigrade walk of a slow runner that has little to fear in its daily life. The general outline is somewhat human-shaped, like all plantigrade animals, but has uniquely raccoon features that include four finger-like toes pointing forward, each terminating in a bulbous tip and fingernail claw, and one shorter thumb-like toe well to the rear of the others and pointing inward.

The Raccoon's normal gait is a shuffling walk, much like a bear, in which soles of especially the hind feet tend to scrape the earth as they're brought forward, leaving scuff marks to the rear of the

hind track. Hind prints generally register separately and beside front tracks on sandy or dusty soils.

Number of toes: five toes on all four feet

Front Foot: 3 in L x 3 in W

Rear Foot: $3 \frac{3}{4}$ in L x $3 \frac{3}{8}$ in W

Straddle: 4 - 5.2 in

Trail Width: 8 - 10 in

Slow Stride: 12 - 16 in

Running Stride: 16 - 28 in

Definitions:

Straddle - The distance between the insides of opposing feet.

Pitch - The distance a foot angles in or out in relation to the animals' line of travel.

Trail Width - The distance between the outermost prints in any one pattern.

Stride - The distance from the foremost toe of one print to the foremost toe of the next print.

Track Size - The length and width of a track. (Sometimes used to determine species.)

This series of Wildlife guides has been compiled and edited by Bill Church.

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