



Living With Wildlife

Raccoons in Massachusetts



Raccoon

Photo © by Bill Byrne

Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) are found throughout Massachusetts. They are extremely adaptable thriving in a wide variety of habitat types including suburban neighborhoods. Raccoons are opportunistic feeders and will eat whatever is most abundant and readily available, including human discards, garbage or pet food.

Description: The raccoon is one of the most easily recognizable furbearers; well-known for its black face mask outlined in white and a bushy tail with alternating black and gray rings. The front and hind paws of raccoons each have 5 digits. The very dexterous front paws are used to grasp and manipulate food items. Raccoons can vary in weight from 12 – 36 pounds, with some exceptionally large raccoons reaching even heavier weights. They range in length from 23 – 38 inches including a 7 – 16 inch tail.

Life History: The mating season of raccoons generally runs from January to March, although later mating is possible. Raccoons have a 63 day gestation period and will give birth to a litter of 3 – 7 cubs (average 4) in April or May. Cubs are weaned at approximately 70 days and are independent of their mother after 20

weeks. They become more independent by late fall, but continue to den with the family group, especially during the severe winter months. Cubs disperse in early spring of the following year at the age of 9 – 10 months.

Habits: Raccoons are mostly crepuscular (active at dawn and dusk) and nocturnal (active at night), however they may be active during the day if food is available. Daytime activity does not mean that the raccoon is diseased. Raccoons occupy a variety of habitat types from agricultural to forested areas and can also live in urban and suburban neighborhoods. Raccoons will often den in tree cavities, abandoned underground burrows, barns, chimneys, attics, or

Look out! This raccoon is about to learn that the skunk has twin nozzles on either side of its anus which can direct sprays or streams of its extremely odorous musk with surprising accuracy.



Photos © by Bill Byrne



other structures. It is important to close off any openings into sheds, attics or under decks to ensure that raccoons cannot establish a den there.

Foods: Raccoons are opportunistic feeders and will eat whatever is easiest to find and most readily available, however when food sources are most abundant, raccoons may be somewhat selective. They will eat plant material such as berries, nuts and seeds. They will also feed on crayfish, crabs, freshwater turtles and their eggs, injured waterfowl, muskrat kits, young birds and less frequently, bird eggs. Raccoons are probably best known for raiding garbage cans, agricultural crops such as corn, chicken coops, and pet food left outdoors.

Diseases: Raccoon rabies first appeared in Massachusetts in 1992 and raccoons are the primary (but not the only) carriers for this disease. Rabies is a neurological disorder that can cause raccoons to be lethargic, have uncoordinated movements, or unprovoked aggressive behavior.



Photos © by Bill Byrne

Rabies can infect most mammals including humans and common domestic pets; so, if there is any direct contact between a raccoon and a person or a pet, contact the Department of Public Health or your town Board of Health for guidance.

Other diseases such as canine distemper virus, can cause neurological symptoms very similar to rabies. Canine distemper virus is not transmissible to humans and most domestic dogs are vaccinated against this virus, however, any raccoon that comes into contact with humans or domestic animals should be treated as a potentially rabid animal.

Raccoons are also primary carriers of raccoon roundworm. The roundworm is shed in raccoon feces. Raccoon roundworm rarely has negative effects on raccoons but it can be very dangerous when it infects other mammals, such as rabbits or humans. A person can become infected by placing objects that are contaminated with raccoon feces in his or her mouth. Because of this, it is important to keep sandboxes covered, as raccoons (and neighborhood cats) may use

Above: Three cubs nestle on top of their mother in a tree cavity den.



them as latrine sites. Also, when cleaning an area that was formerly occupied by raccoons (such as sheds or barns), people should wear gloves and a face mask to avoid ingestion of the raccoon roundworm eggs. Remember daytime activity is not an indicator of disease. For more information on raccoon roundworm, visit the Centers for Disease Control web page at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dpd/parasites/baylisascaris/default.htm>.



Photo © by Bill Byrne

To prevent conflicts with raccoons...

Secure your garbage!

Raccoons will happily raid garbage cans and compost heaps. Make sure garbage is kept in tightly closed containers. Take out trash on the morning of pick-up instead of the night before. Keep compost in secure vented containers to prevent access to this attractive food source. These practices prevent artificial feeding of raccoons and also make your area less attractive to them.

Do not feed or pet raccoons!

Raccoons are wild animals and feeding, whether directly or indirectly, may cause them to lose their fear of people.

Feed pets indoors!

Do not put pet food outdoors under any circumstances. Outdoor pet food inadvertently feeds a variety of wildlife species including raccoons. Causing raccoons to congregate at a feeder can also facilitate the spread of disease from raccoons to other wildlife or domestic species.

Eliminate potential denning areas!

Close off openings under porches and buildings. Seal any openings that lead into sheds or attics and cap off chimneys.

Share this information with your neighbors!

Your best efforts will be futile if neighbors are providing raccoons with food and shelter.

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For more information contact **MassWildlife** at:

Western Wildlife District, Dalton: (413) 684-1646

Connecticut Valley Wildlife Dist., Belchertown: (413) 323-7632

Central Wildlife District, West Boylston: (508) 835-3607

Northeast Wildlife District, Ayer: (978) 772-2145

Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne: (508) 759-3406

Field Headquarters, Westborough: (508) 389-6300

or visit our website at www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/facilities/districts

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