

When Raccoons Become a Nuisance

by Barry Sabean

Raccoons, *Procyon lotor*, live throughout Nova Scotia, but are most common in agricultural areas or in the vicinity of marshes, lakes and rivers. Raccoon populations are very adaptable and can increase in cities and towns where mature trees, attics, sheds, and storm sewers are used as dens. Characteristic features include short pointed ears, a long pointed snout, and greyish-brown fur covering the body. The raccoon's most distinguishing features are the black mask around the eyes and the black rings circling the long bushy tail.

Adults grow to about 32 inches (81 cm) including the tail, and larger animals may reach weights of more than 30 pounds (13.6 kg). Raccoons are excellent climbers and are very dexterous. They are most active at night, seeking refuge during the daylight hours in hollow trees, dense vegetation, rock crevices, old buildings, barns, chimneys, or other cavity spaces. During the winter months raccoons usually "den-up" for the coldest periods; this is not a true hibernation and they often venture out during warm spells.

Raccoons eat a variety of foods including insects, frogs, bird eggs, fruit, and garden vegetables, especially corn. Because of their ability to live in association with humans and their varied food preferences and denning habits, people often consider raccoons to be a nuisance.

Legal Status

In Nova Scotia, raccoons are classed as furbearers and receive legal protection. If you wish to trap or shoot raccoons, you must first obtain a permit from the local Natural Resources office. This does not apply if they are caught alive and later released as discussed under the section entitled Removal.

Damage Identification

Raccoons may cause damage or nuisance problems in a variety of ways. Their distinctive tracks often provide evidence of their involvement.



Raccoon tracks are distinctive with their "hand-like" front print and the five long rear toes. The "heel" of the hind foot often does not show.

Raccoons occasionally kill poultry and domestic ducks, often by biting the heads off adult birds. The crop and breasts may be torn or chewed and the entrails eaten. Bits of flesh are often found near water. Young poultry in cages may be killed or injured by raccoons attempting to pull them through the mesh. Eggs may be removed completely or eaten on the spot with only the heavily cracked shell remaining.

In gardens, raccoons prefer sweet corn. Typical damage is characterized by partly eaten ears with the husks pulled back. Stalks may also be broken as the animals climb to get at the ears.

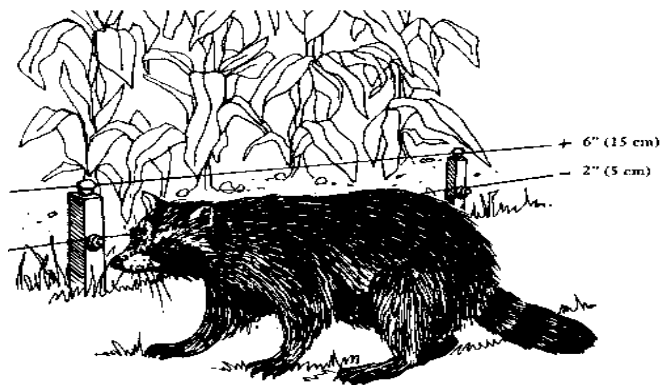
Rolled-up sod on lawns is also characteristic of raccoon damage and is a result of their search for large grubs such as June bug larvae. If the grub population is high, raccoons may return repeatedly, rolling up extensive areas of sod on successive nights.

Raccoons may cause damage or nuisance problems around houses or outbuildings when they try to gain access to attics or chimneys or when they raid garbage in search of food. In extreme cases raccoons may tear off shingles or trim boards to gain access to attic or wall space. Barns are occasionally home to large numbers of raccoons.

Preventive Techniques

Prevention is more practical than removing individual animals. If a good raccoon habitat exists in the vicinity and the original temptation is still there, chances are problems will reoccur.

Keeping raccoons out is usually the preferred method of prevention. In poultry barns, damage can normally be eliminated by covering openings such as doors and windows with a wire mesh fence with an outward overhang. Raccoons are superb climbers and can scale conventional fences with ease. They may also use overhanging branches to bypass the fence. A "hot wire" from an electric fence charger at the top of the fence will greatly improve its effectiveness.



Electric fencing can be very effective at excluding raccoons from sweet corn and other crops

Electric fences are also effective at keeping raccoons out of gardens. Chargers and insulators can be obtained from a farm supply dealer. One wire six inches (15 cm) from the ground may be sufficient, but a more efficient setup would have a ground wire about two inches (5 cm) from the ground and the hot wire six inches (15 cm) above that. Care must be taken in order to ensure that vegetation does not short out the hot wire. The fence can be turned off during the day and energized at night. Caution signs should be installed, and local children warned.

Garbage cans can be "raccoon-proofed" by securing the lids with elastic tie-downs available at most hardware stores. In addition, they should be fastened in an upright position which prevents the raccoons from tipping them over. Metal or wooden stakes placed through the carrying handles and driven into the ground are effective. Wooden or metal garbage can bins with latchable doors provide the ultimate in security.

Raccoon access to roofs and chimneys may be by way of trees, trellises, downspouts, vines, or shrubs. Keeping raccoons off the roof is desirable but may not always be practical. Therefore, efforts should be made to keep them out of the house by replacing loose shingles, repairing holes, or installing chimney caps or wire screening. Be certain that all the animals are out before final exclusion procedures are completed.

Removal

Where raccoons are plentiful, hunters and trappers should be encouraged to harvest surplus animals during the regular open seasons. The local Natural Resources office may be able to suggest competent individuals. Where this option is not practical, the use of live traps is usually the best alternative. In many areas licensed Nuisance Wildlife Operators may be hired.

"Coons" are relatively easy to catch in live traps, but it takes a sturdy trap to hold one. Traps should be at least 10 x 12 x 32 inches (25 x 30 x 80 cm) and constructed of a heavy-gauge wire. Some hardware stores or trapping supply dealers may have suitable commercial models available. For single-door traps, the back should be placed against a wall, rock, or other solid object. It is important to ensure that the back portion of the trap be tightly screened with small (0.5 in. or 1.3 cm) mesh screening to prevent the animals from reaching through the sides to pull out the bait. Sometimes it helps to partially cover the trap with brush. Staking down the trap will help prevent raccoons from rolling the trap over.

Barrel traps can be economically constructed by placing an open-topped 45-gallon (200 L) barrel next to a fencepost. Drill a few holes around the bottom and bait it with canned pet food, sardines, or other smelly foods. Any raccoons entering through the top should be unable to jump or climb out. Check the barrel every morning to prevent unnecessary suffering.

Raccoons caught by live trapping should be disposed of according to the directions of Natural Resources staff. Those being released should be relocated at least 10 miles (16 km) from their capture site, in a remote wooded location.

Parasites and Diseases

Raccoons are host to a number of parasites and diseases that can infest people or pets, including canine distemper. Rabies is another concern although to date, no cases have been reported in Nova Scotian raccoons. Any raccoons exhibiting abnormal behavior should be avoided, and Natural Resources staff advised. Dead raccoons should be buried. Try not to touch the carcass, or wear disposable rubber gloves and wash well afterward.

Anytime a raccoon (or other wild animal) bites or scratches someone, the animal should be killed, if possible, and Natural Resources staff notified.

Dens or other heavily utilized raccoon areas may be infested with the eggs of raccoon roundworm. This parasite can cause severe health problems in humans who accidentally ingest the eggs found in raccoon feces. This is of particular concern when children's play areas are nearby. Every effort should be made to remove raccoon feces from areas frequented by people. The use of rubber gloves and a dust mask are recommended.

Economics and Aesthetics

One of Nova Scotia's most valuable furbearers, raccoons provide income for trappers and hunters, and hours of recreation for people who enjoy watching them. They also perform an important ecological role as predators and prey. Although raccoon damage and nuisance problems may be significant, preventative techniques and control of problem individuals or localized populations normally provide satisfactory solutions.

