

Nature's little bandit, the intelligent, adaptable raccoon
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Did you know that studies have shown that raccoons are able to remember the solution to tasks for up to three years after they learned them? Although some folks may consider these "little bandits" a pest, raccoons are extremely intelligent animals.

The name raccoon basically means "the one who rubs, scrubs and scratches with its hands." The creature is unique in many ways. They have very dexterous front paws and a facial mask. The "mask" appears as an area of black fur around the eyes, which contrasts with the surrounding white face. For the most part, raccoons are nocturnal critters. They are the largest of the procyonid family, having a body length of from 16 to 28 inches and weight of 8 to 20 pounds.

Raccoons are omnivores, meaning they eat plants and animals. Their diet consists of about 40 percent invertebrates, 33 percent plant foods and 27 percent vertebrates. These cute critters sample their food and other objects with their front paws to examine it and remove any unwanted parts. They will also "douse" objects into nearby water before consuming them. These creatures originally favored mixed forests in all North America. With changes in the landscapes, development and agriculture, they have learned to adapt to just about any type of environment.

Raccoons are very unique in their abilities regarding movement. They can stand on their hand legs to examine objects with their front paws. The sense of touch is the most important asset to the creature. Their paws, which resemble little hands, bring food to the mouth and hold it while they eat. Raccoons have been known to open jars, locks, car latches and many other man-made closing devices including garbage can lids. The "hyper sensitive" front paws are covered with a thin protective layer, which becomes pliable when wet. The five digits on the forepaws have no webbing between them. The raccoon's brain is specialized with almost two thirds of the cerebral cortex devoted to the interpretation of touch. In fact, by using specialized hairs near their claws which are similar to whiskers, they can identify objects before actually touching them with their little hands.

It is said that raccoons are color blind, though their eyes are well-adapted for sensing green light. They see very well at night but have poor long distance vision. They also have an excellent sense of smell. Raccoons are very curious, inquisitive creatures and will seldom pass up an opportunity to investigate nearby smells.

Their top speed when running is about 10 to 15 miles per hour. They are good swimmers and have been known to remain in the water for hours at a time. They can move about 3 miles per hour while swimming.

For its size, the raccoon can perform a feat that most mammals cannot. It has the ability to climb down a tree headfirst by rotating its hind feet so they are pointing backwards. Raccoons have a dual cooling system to regulate their temperature, which means they are able to sweat and pant for heat dissipation.

Raccoons do not construct their own den sites but rely on natural processes or the work of other animals. They usually den in hollow trees, rock crevices and ground dens. Active den trees are identified by claw marks or worn bark. These dens include abandoned buildings, car bodies, wood or brush piles, hay stacks, rock crevices and abandoned dens of other animals.

Adult males are generally solitary animals; however the females form family groups and are very social. They will feed and den together. Females give birth to an average litter of three or four babies each spring. Babies stay with their mothers for up to a year. The male has a range of about a mile in diameter,

while the females and their young utilize smaller territories.

Due to its adaptability, the raccoon has been able to utilize urban areas as a habitat. This has caused problems for some folks that have found trash cans constantly overturned and the contents strewn across their lawns. These incidents are unfortunate and can be quite irritating; however, raccoons are simply trying to survive in a world where their natural habitat is shrinking daily. They are amazingly intelligent animals and contribute to the diversity and balance of the natural world.

Fun Raccoon Facts

- Population densities of raccoons in urban areas can be 20 times higher than for raccoons in rural environments. There may be as many as 8,000 raccoons living in large cities.
- Raccoons have a large array of vocalizations. They purr, whistle, growl, hiss, scream and even whinny.
- Raccoons have been kept as pets (President Coolidge and his wife had one named Rebecca), and while young, seem happy to be in human company. As they mature, especially during mating season, they can become increasingly destructive and aggressive.
- Raccoons never den more than 1,200 feet from a permanent water source.
- A raccoon's hands are so nimble they can unlace a shoe, unlatch a cage and deftly retrieve coins as thin as dimes from your shirt pocket.
- Raccoons will over-eat when nursing.
- Raccoons can easily unlock doors.
- A baby raccoon's eyes do not open until about three weeks.
- Raccoons are very clean and use a common latrine in the wild.