



MANAGING RACCOON PROBLEMS

Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) are common throughout California. They are medium sized animals 12 - 35+ lbs. and 20 - 40 inches long, including a bushy tail with 4 to 7 black rings. The fur has a salt and pepper appearance with the black mask marking on a whitish face characteristic of the species. The tracks of raccoons are very distinctive. The hind foot is long, narrow, and rests flat on the ground like those of a bear. The front paw is hand-like, with toes that are long and well separated. This permits the use of the front paws with almost the facility of a monkey's hands.



BIOLOGY

Raccoons breed mainly in February and March, but matings may occur from December through June. The gestation period is about 63 days. Most litters are born in April or May, but some late-breeding females may not give birth until June, July, or August. Raccoons produce one litter per year. The average litter size is 3 to 5 young. The offspring are weaned between 2 and 4 months and usually stay with the female until the following spring. Yearling females do not always breed, but adult females normally breed every year, especially if food is plentiful.

The diet of raccoons is extremely diverse. They will eat fruit, berries, grain, eggs, poultry, vegetables, nuts, mollusks, fish, insects, rodents, carrion, pet food, and garbage. Individual animals may learn to use specialized foods such as poultry, fruit crops, small livestock, or garbage by watching other raccoons. Contrary to popular myth, raccoons do not always wash their food before eating, although they frequently play with their food in water.

Raccoons are nocturnal or night-time active animals. Urban raccoon populations are frequently underestimated because people seldom see them traveling during the daytime. They are also territorial, particularly the males. Adult males may occupy areas of 3 to 20 sq. mi.; females have a much smaller territory of 1 to 6 sq. mi. Raccoons den up in hollow trees, drain pipes, homes and buildings, under decks and storage buildings, brush piles, and abandoned burrows.

DAMAGE

Raccoons can cause substantial damage. In urban areas, raccoons damage buildings (particularly attics and roofs), gardens, fruit trees, lawns, garbage cans, and trash containers. They are also attracted to pet food left outdoors and will attack pets. Occasionally, one or more raccoons will establish a communal toilet area resulting in time to the deposition of a large number of scats. In rural areas, raccoons may feed on farm crops or raid poultry houses. A raccoon typically attacks birds by biting the head or upper neck area. The heads of adult birds are usually bitten off and left some distance from the body. The crop and breast may be torn and chewed and the entrails eaten. Raccoons have been known to mutilate poultry in cages by pulling heads or legs off. Several kills may be made during a single night raid with part of one or more carcasses fed upon. Dead fowl may be at the kill site or dragged several yards away. Raccoons are also serious predators of wild bird populations. Reports indicate that raccoons have been responsible for eliminating local populations of some nesting waterfowl.

DISEASE

Since free roaming wildlife does not receive veterinary care, all wildlife species can carry diseases and parasites. Raccoons are known carriers of rabies, canine distemper, encephalitis, histoplasmosis, trypanosomiasis, coccidiosis, toxoplasmosis, tularemia, tuberculosis, listeriosis, leptospirosis, roundworms, and mange. They are also infested with fleas, ticks, lice, and mites which are known transmitters of disease. Children and pets are particularly at risk.

PROBLEM PREVENTION

Raccoons are attracted to urban areas by the easy accessibility of food, water, and shelter. Reducing or eliminating the availability of all of these factors will encourage raccoons to leave. Tight fitting lids should be kept on garbage cans; pets should be fed during daylight hours and any leftovers removed immediately; water bowls should be emptied or taken in at night; gardens should be frequently harvested and windfall fruit picked up. Food should never be intentionally left out for wild mammals.

Raccoons can be excluded from buildings by covering foundation vents with slotted metal vent covers and by using 1/4 inch grid screening to cover attic vents and chimneys. They have been known to enter homes through pet doors; be sure these are locked at night. Raccoons sometimes take up residence under a low deck. They may be excluded by using 1/4 inch grid screening or solid metal flashing. Trench around the perimeter of the deck a minimum of 12 inches deep, insert screening in trench, and backfill. Attach top of screening to facade of deck with nails or fence post staples. Before completing final seal on the last entry point, it is wise to make sure no animals are trapped inside. On the night before completing repairs, sprinkle flour in the entrance hole, and check for tracks the following morning. If no tracks are evident for 3 consecutive nights, no animals are likely present.



You may wish to make a temporary one-way exit using 1/4 inch grid screening. Form the screening into a cone or funnel shape that will permit animals to leave but not to re-enter. The large end should be sized to encircle the entry hole and be attached over the hole to the facade of the deck or building with nails or fence post staples. The small end should face away from the house and be 4 - 6 inches in diameter.

Raccoons may be kept away from roof areas by trimming tree branches 10 feet from roof and by keeping climbing plants trimmed away from roof and eave areas.

Exclusion of raccoons from coops and poultry yards is usually the most practical and effective method to prevent losses. At night, poultry should be kept in raccoon-proof sheds or houses. Ideally, poultry should be confined day and night in a sturdy house combined with a predator-proof outdoor run area. This also provides protection from many other types of predator. Often with a few simple tools and a little material, even somewhat dilapidated coops can be rejuvenated into raccoon-proof condition. Keep in mind that raccoons are good climbers. Moreover, they are strong animals capable of seizing and pushing or pulling objects with considerable force. Usually raccoons are not inclined to break through walls or fences that are intact and in reasonably good condition. Entry is usually made through open, weak, or loose places. Following is a list of measures you can use to protect poultry from raccoons.

1. Cover tops of outdoor runs with wire mesh and/or suitable panelling material and fasten securely. If this is not practical, shut poultry indoors at night.
2. Patch or repair all holes or weak places in existing wire or wood (house or run).
3. Check all edges of overlapping or stapled chicken wire for tightness and tie or staple securely.
4. Check ground edges of coop for tightness. Raccoons may dig under fencing or enlarge existing spaces.
5. Coop doors should be close fitting and sturdy. Beware of plywood doors which may have substantial warp at corners.
6. Simple door fasteners, such as plain hooks, should be replaced with more sophisticated devices such as safety hooks or locking hasps. Raccoons can manipulate and open elementary door latches.
7. To prevent raccoons from reaching in and grabbing poultry, night roosting or standing areas should be at least 12 inches away from cracks or wire mesh of more than 3/4 inch sq. spacing. Smaller size wire can be installed near roosting areas.
8. Birds housed in wire or plastic cages should be kept within the confines of raccoon-proof buildings at night. An alternative solution is to hang or suspend cages from ceilings at least 4 feet above the floor and 5 feet away from walls.

The use of a watch dog may prove advantageous in preventing damage in some situations. However, this is not recommended due to the fact that raccoons can be extremely vicious.

Raccoons causing lawn and turf damage may be encouraged to leave by controlling the grub worms or other subsoil insects that raccoons eat.

DIRECT CONTROL

Where raccoons become so numerous that they are a serious pest, they must be excluded or removed. In rural areas, nuisance and damaging raccoons may be trapped or shot. Since raccoons are classified as furbearers, a trapping license or depredation permit may be required before taking any animals. In urban areas, trapping with baited cage traps is the most satisfactory way to remove raccoons. Since raccoons and skunks occupy similar habitats, it is advisable to cover the top, bottom, and sides of an open grid cage trap with heavy cardboard or 1/4 inch plywood. Place the trap in raccoon trails or in areas of known activity. Almost any food is acceptable as bait to trap raccoons. Using fruit, berries, vegetables, raw egg, or peanut butter instead of meat will reduce the likelihood of trapping neighborhood cats. The addition of a wadded up piece of aluminum foil in the trap may help to stimulate curiosity. There are no Federally registered chemicals to control raccoons. Approved chemical repellents have not been found to be effective.

LAWS AND REGULATIONS

Raccoons are not threatened or endangered. They are classified as furbearers in California. Fur harvest regulations are set by the California Department of Fish & Game. It is a violation of California state law for any wildlife to be kept as pets. Only authorized wildlife rehabilitators may keep injured or orphaned wildlife and then only for limited periods of time. California Department of Fish & Game Regulations prohibit the relocation of raccoons and other wildlife without written permission of the Department. For further information on the legal status of raccoons and other wildlife, contact your California Department of Fish & Game Regional Office.

For further information or assistance in solving raccoon problems contact the USDA-APHIS-WS State Office (916-979-2675) or the USDA-APHIS-WS District Office for your area.

