



Creature Feature: Fall 2018

By W. Scott Douglas

Eastern Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*)



By T Trimm

been living here, I had yet to have a raccoon hole up in one of my outbuildings. When I was growing up in VT, we had many such visits, mostly to raid the garbage cans. I knew he would leave once the dog was removed. So I gathered up my excited hound, and went back to bed.

This is a very interesting animal indeed. More closely related to modern bears than any other living creature, raccoons are known for their resourcefulness and intelligence. Raccoons are medium sized mammals, but widely ranging in size anywhere from 10 to 60 pounds and 16-28 inches in length (not including the tail). They are incredibly adaptable and widely distributed all over North America and have been introduced into Europe and Asia. They are preyed upon by bobcats, coyotes and fishers, but their biggest enemies are dogs and humans. In recent times, automobiles claim the lives of more raccoons than anything else. Raccoons are primarily nocturnal, and spend their nights foraging for a wide variety of foods ranging from fruits, berries and nuts, to crayfish, turtles and frogs to rodents, eggs, and human garbage. Raccoons are highly intelligent, and they've been known to not only solve complex puzzles for food, but remember the solutions for up to three years! The best way to describe a raccoon's gait is a waddle, but they can move up to 10-15 miles per hour when chased, and are adept at both climbing and swimming. Raccoons have been known to purposefully take to water to throw chasing predators off their scent.

Last fall I was awakened early on a Sunday morning by my dog Tucker barking hysterically at something. I stumbled to the deck and saw that he was barking at something in our garden shed. I could hear a strange combination of growls and trills coming from the shed that I could not place. I retrieved a flashlight and went down to investigate. When I pointed my flashlight into the shed I was met with the bandit face of what appeared to me to be a very scared young raccoon. I was surprised at first, because in the thirty or so years I have

Raccoons have a home range of up to 3-4 square miles in regions such as ours, higher in the plains. They will den almost anywhere, but they prefer to nest in hollows high up in trees. Typically, female raccoons come into heat in late winter or early spring. If successfully fertilized, gestation will last 60-65 days, with a resulting litter of from 3-7 cubs or "kits". Kits are only partially haired, blind and deaf at birth. Their eyes and ears open at about 19 days. Typically, the female will keep the kits in the den for 30-60 days. Kits can eat solid food at 9 weeks, but weaning is not completed until about 16 weeks of age. The males do not assist with the rearing of young at all, but the female and kits will remain as a family unit all summer, and sometimes into the winter if conditions are particularly harsh. Despite the fact that the typical food for a raccoon is not available in the cold of the winter, they do not hibernate. If not hit by a car, raccoons typically live for 5-6 years in the wild.

I imagine everyone who reads this article has seen a raccoon at some point, either scrounging around their garage, or waddling across the road. The best chance of observing one in its natural habitat requires spending time in a wooded area at night, mostly near water, such as our Creek. While they can be very entertaining to watch, care should be taken to avoid approaching any raccoon, as they can carry a number of diseases including distemper and rabies. It's probably safer to observe their movements during the day via their tracks, which they are not shy about leaving about for you to find and follow.