

LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

Humane, Effective Solutions to Human-Wildlife Conflicts

A Program of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

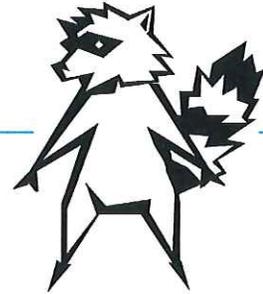


Illustration by Chris Hill

Raccoons: Managing These Adaptable, Intelligent Foragers

In cities, suburbs, and small towns across Massachusetts, people are noticing a change in their neighborhoods. Some think it's good. Some think it's bad. But everybody seems to be talking about it: more wild animals are making their homes in and around people's yards and houses, in parks and playgrounds, in business developments, even right on Main Street.

Raccoons are highly adaptable and appear to flourish in places where humans have developed the land. If these intelligent animals have taken up residence in or around your home, becoming a nuisance when foraging for food or shelter, this publication can help.

General Information

The raccoon is a small, nocturnal mammal, typically 20–30 inches long and weighing 15–30 pounds, though raccoons can weigh up to 60 pounds in urban areas where they thrive on our refuse. Their fur is grayish brown with a bushy banded tail and black masked face. They are highly adaptable, extremely intelligent animals that live well in cities, suburbs, and rural environments. Raccoons are omnivorous and will eat almost anything, from fish, insects, eggs, and young mammals to fruits, vegetables, and nuts. Most active at night, raccoons sometimes also forage for food by day. They will make their nests almost anywhere—in tree cavities, brush piles, abandoned burrows, chimneys, attics, crawl spaces, storm sewers, haystacks, and barn lofts—and

usually have more than one den site available for use at any one time.

Raccoons are as intelligent as dogs and cats, and their front limbs provide them with great manual dexterity. They have routines for food and shelter, and remember places that are good for each.

Possible Conflicts and Solutions

Raccoons can cause damage by dumping trash cans, disturbing gar-

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dens and ponds, and injuring cats or small dogs, or they may simply be a nuisance for homeowners.

You can usually hear the often very vocal conversations of raccoon family groups in attics or chimneys at dusk and just before dawn.

If raccoons have taken up residence in or around your home, the first step is to encourage them to move out. This is easily accomplished by using mild harassment techniques and following up with exclusionary methods.

Please note that it is especially important that the animals leave before you seal their entrances in

the spring and summer months, when young are often present. If young raccoons are present in your home, please tolerate the animals for a few weeks to ensure that these babies are not abandoned to die in your home.

Inspect the area to determine how the animals are getting in, then close off all but one entryway. Here are some ways to encourage the animals to move on. It is best to do the following at dusk so raccoons can safely find new shelter at night.

- Use mild repellents, such as ammonia-soaked rags placed near or inside the entryway (to one side) so the raccoon has to pass them to get in or out. Replenish them as the smell fades.
- Place a flashlight (switched on) in or as close to the den site as possible. The light will annoy raccoons.
- Play a radio near the den site day and night to further annoy them.
- If possible, once raccoons have been excluded, trim back any tree branches or limbs that are close to the house. If it is impractical to eliminate all branches, tree trunks can be wrapped with two-foot-wide sheet metal beginning two feet above the ground. This prevents raccoons from climbing the trees.

Listen closely for raccoon young, called kits, before using any permanent exclusionary methods.

Young kits often sound like whining puppies.

Closely monitor the raccoons to determine when they have moved, and after the family is gone, tightly secure the area to prevent reentry. Trapping adult raccoons often leads to separation and probable death of the young and also makes the habitat available for more animals to move in. If there are no young present, install a one-way door over the den entrance, allowing the raccoon to leave in the evening but preventing its reentry. Once the animal is gone, be sure to permanently seal entryways with heavy-gauge wire mesh.

Make sure your chimney is securely capped. Raccoons have little hands that can easily dislodge loose screens or covers. They are agile climbers, and females like to use the flue or smoke shelf as a den.

Invasive techniques, such as using smoke or fire to drive animals out, should never be used, as the mother will most likely abandon the site, resulting in the death of the kits that are physically unable to climb.

If a raccoon enters your house, close the doors between the animal and the rest of the house, then open doors and windows to the outside. Let the animal escape on its own. Leave the capture and handling of wildlife to the experts.

THE LIVING WITH WILDLIFE MISSION

The MSPCA Living With Wildlife program aims to protect wild species, now and in the future. The program promotes peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife in urban, suburban, and rural Massachusetts communities by helping to resolve human-animal conflicts in a humane, nonlethal, long-term, and cost-effective manner.

Vegetable and fruit gardens can be susceptible to raccoon damage, often as foods are ripening. Closely monitor your garden at these times and take steps such as netting, lights, and radios to keep the animals away until harvest time. For persistent raccoons, single-strand electric fencing can be an effective exclusionary method. The use of Mylar balloons, pinwheels, or aluminum strips will often frighten raccoons away from a site as well. Spreading cayenne pepper over an area can also often be an effective repellent against raccoons.

Secure pet doors, especially at night, to prevent raccoons from using them to enter your home.

Public-Health Concerns

Raccoons are among the primary carriers of the rabies virus in the United States and are classified as one of four rabies vector species.

The other three rabies vector species are foxes, skunks, and bats. Raccoon rabies occurs primarily in the eastern United States.

Another serious public-health concern is a roundworm parasite that can infect raccoons. Humans can become infected if they accidentally ingest or inhale roundworm eggs that are passed through raccoon feces. Care should be taken and protective masks and clothing should be worn when you are cleaning areas that were inhabited by raccoons. Raccoons are also hosts for giardiasis.

For more information about humanely solving human-wildlife conflicts or about the MSPCA's Living With Wildlife program, call (617) 522-7400, visit www.livingwithwildlife.org, or e-mail lww@mspca.org.