



Raccoons in New Jersey

The Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) is found across southern Canada southward to northern South America. It is found throughout New Jersey. Raccoons are amazingly adaptable mammals and live in a variety of habitats from woodlands and forests far from mankind to cities where they thrive in storm sewers and forage by raiding garbage cans. The raccoon is a valuable furbearer to trappers in New Jersey and is also a valued game animal to those who enjoy hunting the animals at night with hounds.

Almost everyone will recognize the raccoon by its “bandit” mask and by its bushy ringed tail. This facial mask, a black band across the eyes and the bushy tail with anywhere from four to ten black rings, is the animal’s most distinct feature. A raccoon’s forepaws resemble slender human hands and make the animal very dexterous. All four paws have five toes. The raccoon is a plantigrade animal and like bears, walks on the sole of the foot with the heel touching the ground.

Coloration may vary slightly with habitat but tends to range from gray to reddish brown to buff. The raccoon's body is stocky, and the animal generally weighs from 10 to 30 pounds. There are records of raccoons weighing in excess of 40 pounds, but this is uncommon. Raccoons are from about 28 to about 40 inches in length. Weight and size may also vary with habitat. Males are usually heavier than females, but the difference is often indistinguishable.

Raccoons have a highly developed sense of touch. Their hand-like forepaws are very sensitive and enable the raccoon to handle, pry and climb with ease. Raccoons have excellent hearing and excellent night vision. The raccoon’s common gait is a shuffle-like walk, however, they are able to run at up to 15 miles per hour. Raccoons are extremely agile climbers and are not much bothered by a fall of 35 to 40 feet. Raccoons are also strong swimmers. However, they are don’t particularly like to swim; without waterproof fur any swimming forces them to take on extra weight.

Raccoons bear one litter of young per year. Breeding occurs from January to February. Young are born in March to April after a gestation of about 60 to 73 days. The usual litter size ranges from one to eight young with three or four being most common. At birth, both the ear and eye canals are closed and do not open until the animal is about three weeks of age. The young raccoons are weaned at between two and three months of age but continue to hunt with their mother and are under her care for about one year. At this time the year-old young will disperse from its mother’s home area. Most young only move a mile or two at this time but there are records of young males moving as far as 150 miles. Females first mate at one year of age while males do not breed until two.

Home range size for a raccoon is dependent on habitat and what resources are readily available. In an urban/suburban setting with readily available man-discarded refuse, a raccoon may only need about 12 acres, but most home range sizes are between 100 and 250 acres in size.

Raccoons are mainly nocturnal and are seldom active during daylight hours. In very cold, snowy periods, raccoons will remain in its den and sleep for long periods at a time, but raccoons do not hibernate. Raccoons generally prefer to den in trees, but they may also use woodchuck burrows, caves, mine shafts, deserted buildings, barns, garages, rain sewers, or houses (even attics or basement of occupied houses). As noted previously, raccoons are extremely adaptable and thrive despite the encroachment of humans on their habitat. Wooded wetlands or at least woodlands near water are preferred habitats, although raccoons can be found in farmlands as well as suburban and urban areas.

A raccoon is both omnivorous and opportunistic. Plants provide a larger part of a raccoon's diet than animals do in most habitats. Plant foods may vary from fruits to nuts, including wild grapes, cherries, apples, persimmons, berries, beechnuts, and acorns. Where available raccoons may also eat commercially grown fruit and produce such as peaches, plums, figs, citrus fruits, watermelons, and walnuts. Corn also can be an important item in a raccoon's diet making these animals very unpopular with farmers. Raccoons consume more invertebrates than vertebrates. Crayfish, insects, rodents, frogs, and bird eggs may all be part of a raccoon's diet. Trash and other food available in suburban and urban areas also can be a part of their diet. Raccoons may also utilize the remains of road-killed animals.

Most raccoons don't live past two years of age in the wild and have a maximum life expectancy in the wild of about ten years. Raccoons have been known to live 18 years in captivity.