

MAMMALS

Status: Common, Native Resident

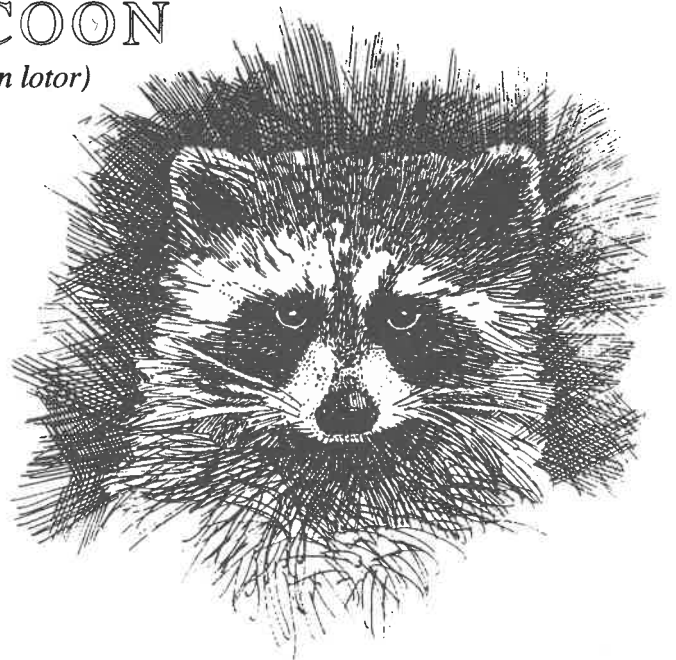
RACCOON

(*Procyon lotor*)

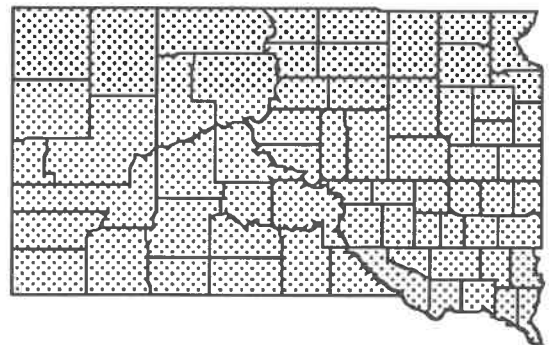
Description

The word raccoon comes from the Algonquian Indian word "arakum" or "aracoun," which means "he scratches with his hands." Raccoons are curious animals with hand-like front feet, which they use to search for food. The Lakota word for raccoon is "wiciteglega." They are also called "coons" in some areas of the United States. The meaning of the scientific name is obscure. *Pro* is Greek for "before" and *cyon* means "dog." Perhaps the raccoon was thought to resemble a primitive dog. The species name is more understandable. *Lotor* is Latin for "washer," and refers to the raccoon's habit of wetting its food.

Raccoons are known for their bandit's mask; a broad black mask across their eyes and cheeks. Raccoon fur is multicolored with shades of gray, black, and yellow on the back and sides fading to much paler underneath. The soft, short underfur is covered with long, coarse guard hairs. These animals have a bushy tail with 4 to 7 conspicuous dark rings. Raccoons have a stocky body with a broad head, pointed nose, and medium-sized ears. The adults are from 2 to 3 feet (61-91 cm) long and weigh from 13 to 25 pounds (5.9-11.4 kg). Males and females are similar in appearance.



Distribution



Raccoons are found in South Dakota wherever there is adequate habitat. Their habitat needs are wooded areas near streams, lakes, and marshes. They also live in agricultural areas where there is

access to water. Their numbers have been increasing in agricultural areas where corn is grown and there are abandoned buildings to use for dens. They are not common in the treeless parts of the plains.

Natural History

Prowling from dusk to dawn, raccoons are *nocturnal* and are rarely seen during the day. The distance they travel in a night depends on the amount of food available and on the weather. These inquisitive animals move with a lumbering gait, exploring anything out of the ordinary. They are good climbers and are curious and intelligent. Their hearing and sense of touch are excellent. Family groups of females and their young will feed and den together, but adult males are usually solitary. Single adults are shy and will move away if a group approaches.

Depending upon food availability and the season, raccoons will eat whatever they can find. Most foraging is done in or near water or around the edges of crops. Literally hundreds of different plants and animals are eaten by these *omnivores*. They feed on crayfish, insects, mollusks, rodents, bird eggs, fish, young rabbits, *carrion* and garbage. As plants become available in the summer, they are eaten in quantity, especially fruits and grains. Raccoons begin storing fat reserves during the fall. Throughout the winter stored fat is the raccoon's principal energy source. Raccoons will begin the winter with 20 to 30 percent of their body weight in fat. Because they live off of this accumulated fat, weight loss may be as high as 50% by spring. Like bears, raccoons do not truly *hibernate*. They sleep in dens during extremely cold weather, but they can be aroused and their metabolic rate and heart rate remain nearly normal.

A *home range* is the area that an animal uses to provide for its needs of food, water, and shelter. Raccoon *home ranges* are

usually associated with waterways. The *home range* of an adult male is about 4,800 acres, although this size can expand during the breeding season. Adult females and young inhabit smaller areas and one male's *home range* often overlaps several females' *home ranges*.

Raccoons use several dens within their *home range* in a random pattern. They don't construct their own den sites, but use hollow trees, stumps, rotten logs, or dens of other animals. They have been known to den in old squirrel nests, caves, brush, haystacks, and farm outbuildings. No nest is made within a den.

As snow and cold weather become more frequent, a raccoon family of mother and young may begin sleeping together in a winter den, which can be a hollow tree, rock crevice, old badger or fox den. Raccoons will remain inactive during severe winter weather, but they can be easily aroused from their sleep, which may last about 4 months. During winter storms they have been known to use communal or group dens with other raccoons, opossums and striped skunks.

Female raccoons have one litter per year. About February the males become active and travel from den to den searching for females. Males will mate with more than one female and do not share in the rearing of the young. A minimal nest is built in a den just before birth at the end of April or first of May. One to 9 young are born with a usual litter of 3 to 4. Equal numbers of males and females are born. Mother raccoons sit up to nurse and may hold one or more young in their forearms. Blind at birth, a newborn's eyes open between 18 and 24 days of age. They can walk when 30 days old. In early June, at 8 to 10 weeks, they will begin accompanying their mother while she forages for food. They are weaned at 16 weeks. Sometimes the young will stay with the mother through their first winter, other times they will disperse in the fall. The new generation may travel 75 miles (120 km) or more before settling in a new location. Raccoons in the wild have lived

more than 12 years, but the average is only 2 to 3 years.

The major predators of raccoons are humans who trap and hunt them. Other causes of death are car accidents and disease. The young are preyed on by great-horned owls and coyotes. Raccoons are also susceptible to rabies and canine distemper. Most sick raccoons reported to the authorities are diagnosed as having canine distemper, which can cause severe reductions in local populations.

Management Considerations

Raccoons are trapped for their furs and for their fat which is a good *lubricant* for leather and machinery. Hunting is usually done on foot with packs of hounds. Damage done by raccoons is outweighed by their value as insect-eaters, fur-bearers and game animals. Individuals that are offensive can be trapped and relocated. They may have to be removed several times as some raccoons will keep returning to home territories. The preservation of large dead or decaying trees is helpful to raccoons, as are restrictions on burning. Prevention of water pollution is essential to providing raccoon habitat.

Glossary

Carrion - dead, decaying animal matter.

Hibernate - to be in a state of dormancy during the winter in which metabolic activity and heart rate are reduced.

Home range - the area an animal uses to provide for its needs of food, water and shelter.

Lubricant - a substance that reduces friction, such as grease or oil.

Nocturnal - active at night.

Omnivore - an animal that eats both plant and animal matter.

References

- Clark, Tim W. and Mark R. Stromberg, 1987. Mammals in Wyoming. Lawrence: University of Kansas, Museum of Natural History.
- Jones, Jr., J. Knox, and others. 1983. Mammals of the Northern Great Plains. Lincoln, University of Nebraska Press.
- Whitaker, Jr., John O. 1980. The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mammals. New York, Alfred P. Knopf.

Selected Resources for Teachers

Children's literature contains many picture books with raccoons as characters. Some of these are scientifically accurate and others are not.

Arnonsky, Jim. Raccoons and Ripe Corn. New York: Lothrop, Lee and Shepard. 1987.

Holmgren, Virginia C. Raccoons in Folklore, History, and Today's Backyards. Santa Barbara, CA: Capra Press, 1990.

Kostyal, Karen. Raccoons. Washington, DC: National Geographic Society, 1987.

World Wide Raccoon Web: a collection of on-line raccoon information and resources!

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