

Raccoon

The raccoon is familiar to almost everybody, but unfortunately not always in a positive way. Raccoons do become pests when they damage corn crops, raid chicken houses, overturn garbage cans, or take up residence where they are not wanted. They can outsmart almost any barrier that stands between them and a tasty food item. But the same characteristics that make raccoons exasperating also make them fascinating. With their curiosity, intelligence, and adaptability they are experts at getting what they need in both natural and humanized environments.



Raccoon in tree

Food and shelter are the basic needs of all animals, and raccoons aren't picky about either one. Tree cavities and rock crevices are prized as den sites, but raccoons are also happy to bed down in brush piles, culverts, haystacks, buildings, storm sewers, abandoned vehicles, and just about any other space that offers protection. They have even been known to take over gray squirrel nests by packing the leafy structures into comfortable resting platforms. And there's not much a raccoon won't eat. Plants, both wild and cultivated, make up the larger share of the diet—raccoons eat berries, fleshy fruits, nuts, animal feed, field crops (especially corn), and garden vegetables. During seasons when plant foods are less abundant animal foods make up the shortfall; the list includes fish, crayfish, aquatic insect larvae, caterpillars, grasshoppers, beetles, ants, bees, wasps, earthworms, salamanders, small rodents, young rabbits, bird and turtle eggs, carrion, and of course garbage.

Given all of this, it's not surprising that raccoons are found just about everywhere in our region. But how exactly do they meet their needs for food and shelter in an area like Hammond Hill, where mature forests dominate the landscape and the human population is sparse? The answers to this question are all around us, if we pay attention to the clues nature provides. You won't find much exposed rock in the Hammond Hill area, so rock crevices aren't available for den sites. But there are plenty of large trees. Look for trees with substantial side branches (nice for resting on) or openings that could lead to internal cavities (ideal for dens). Raccoon scat—blunt tubes about ½ - 1 inch in diameter—is often found in deposits of varying ages around the bases of den trees. There are also artifacts from a bygone era scattered through the hills: piles of partly rotted saw logs, rusted vehicles, and abandoned shacks. If you take a look you may find that the premises are occupied by a raccoon.

The scat of wild animals is filled with information about what the animal was feeding on, so raccoon scat can indicate how Hammond Hill raccoons meet their energy needs. But first a warning: Raccoon scat should be handled with care because it may contain the eggs of a parasite that can infect humans. A couple of sticks can be used to tease scat apart for examination without touching it.

If you do this you'll find that raccoons eat lots of apples, grapes, berries, corms, acorns, nuts, and seeds. If the menu was weighted more toward animal foods you might find insect parts, crayfish exoskeletons, the bones of small animals, or fish scales. Raccoons are fond of wasp and bee eggs and larvae, and they often dig up ground nests.

They are also good at locating and unearthing turtle nests, leaving scenes like the one in the photo. The pit where the clutch of turtle eggs was buried is surrounded by opened egg shells and shell fragments. When turtle eggs hatch successfully the shells are left underground and soil surface where the hatchlings emerge is barely disturbed.



Raided turtle nest



Tracks offer wonderful clues to the habits of raccoons. In warm weather you may find raccoon tracks along the muddy margins of streams and ponds, and you may see how a raccoon traveled along the edge, pausing occasionally to step into the shallow water.

The animals investigate with their sensitive forepaws, feeling among the rocks, algae, and debris for small fish, crayfish, aquatic insect larvae, frogs, and salamanders.

Raccoon tracks: Mud on snow

Raccoons pass the coldest parts of winter in a state of torpor in their dens, but during warm spells they become active and may leave tracks in snow. A raccoon trail may guide you to a den tree, or to a deer carcass. Wet seeps or sections of small streams may remain free of snow and are promising sources of food. The photo shows the muddy prints of a raccoon crossing mounds of snow from one wet area to another in search of aquatic invertebrates, earthworms, or salamanders.

When we think of raccoons we should remember that they were surviving successfully long before we transformed forests and wetlands into suburbs and cities. They belong in wild places just as much as other wild creatures do, and they have as much to show us about wild ways.



Raccoon

by Linda Spielman