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WORLD OF WONDER

Exploring the realms of history, science, and nature.

RACCOONS



These clever and curious animals can adapt to a variety of habitats. Raccoons may look cute, but it's important to remember that they are wild animals. There are seven species of raccoon and 22 subspecies. Mexico's pygmy raccoon, also known as the Cozumel raccoon, is endangered.

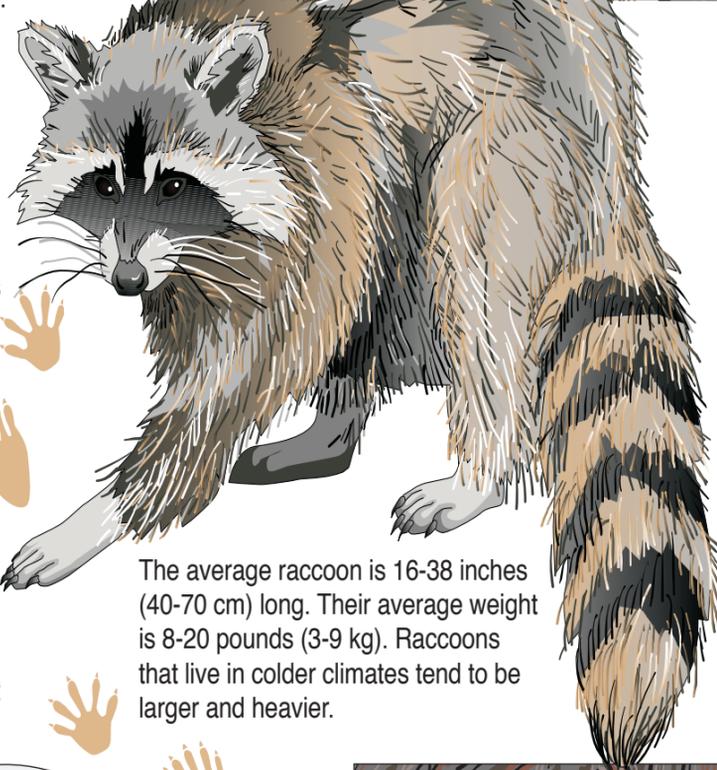
What's in a name

The English word **raccoon** can be traced to colonial Virginia, where it was recorded by John Smith as *aroughcun*. This term is from the Powhatan Algonquian language and translates as "one who rubs and scratches with his hands." The scientific name of the common raccoon is *Procyon lotor*, which translates to "before-dog washer." A group of raccoons is called a **nursery** or a **gaze**. Males are called **boars**, females are called **sows** and babies are called **kits** or **cubs**.

Raccoons have grayish-brown fur with a black mask and a bushy tail with four to six black rings. Raccoons have been hunted as food and for their thick fur.



Raccoons have great dexterity that gives them the ability to open doors, jars, bottles and latches. They are also great swimmers and climbers.

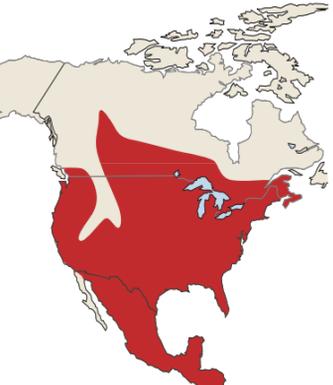


Raccoons can run up to 15 mph (24 kph) even while climbing up trees! They can fall from heights of 130 feet (40 m) and remain unharmed.

The average raccoon is 16-38 inches (40-70 cm) long. Their average weight is 8-20 pounds (3-9 kg). Raccoons that live in colder climates tend to be larger and heavier.

Where in the world

Raccoons are native to most of North and Central America and northern parts of South America. They have been introduced to parts of Europe and Japan. They live in forests and woodlands, but they also live near farms and even in cities. Because they're so smart, they can adapt to different areas.



Raccoon hands have five fingers and look a bit like human hands. They use their very sensitive hands to collect food, open shells, nuts, doors or trash cans.



In winter, raccoons stay inside their dens, but they do not hibernate. They enter a state known as **torpor**.

Food for thought

Raccoons are **omnivores** and will eat plants and animals. They like to eat insects, eggs, small mammals, fruit, berries, seeds and human garbage. Raccoons often wash their food in water before eating it. This may help make their sensitive front paws even more sensitive.

Bringing up baby

Raccoons are mature and ready to mate at 1-2 years old. Mating usually begins in late winter. Males mate with many partners throughout the year, while females have only one partner. The female is pregnant for about 63 days. She gives birth to 1-6 baby kits. The mother raises her offspring alone and is very protective of her babies.



Poor pets

Trying to turn a raccoon into a pet is a very bad idea and is illegal in many places. They are difficult to tame, have health issues and can be very destructive.

Home sweet home

Raccoons like to den in hollow trees and tend to stay close to home. Some are solitary creatures, while others live in loose communities.

Did you know

Raccoons score a very high mammal IQ – above cats and just below monkeys. One study showed that raccoons can remember solutions to tasks for up to three years. The smallest raccoon subspecies is the **Key Vaca raccoon** from the Florida Keys. It has a typical weight of 4-6 pounds (1.8-2.7 kg). Raccoons can make more than 50 sounds. They hiss, purr, whistle and growl. Raccoons are generally **nocturnal**, meaning they are awake during nighttime hours. In the 18th century, raccoon fur was a symbol of status. Coon-skin hats were very popular and even used as currency.

Threats to them

The life expectancy of a wild raccoon is 1.5 to 3 years. Captive raccoons have been known to live for more than 20 years. Young raccoons are vulnerable to losing their mother and to starvation in winter. The most common natural cause of death is disease, such as distemper. Coyotes, bobcats, wolves, large hawks and owls prey on raccoons, but the main causes of death for raccoons are hunting, trapping and being hit by motor vehicles.

Threats to us

Raccoons can transmit rabies to domestic animals and people. Their droppings often contain roundworms. Raccoons also destroy gardens and tip over garbage cans. They cause structural damage when they establish dens in sheds and other buildings and when searching for food.

SOURCES: World Book Encyclopedia, World Book Inc.; The World Almanac for Kids; <https://www.softschools.com>; <https://www.livescience.com>

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