

Raccoons: Distribution and Identification

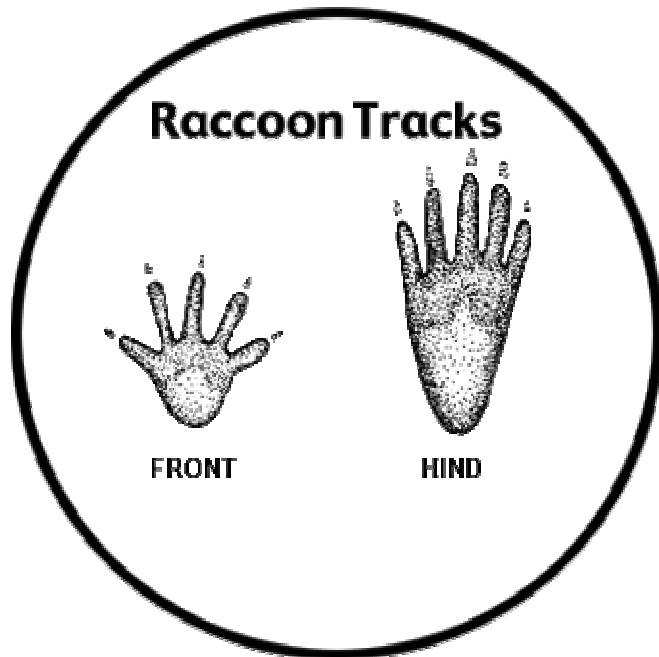
The raccoon is common throughout Massachusetts and most of North America. Raccoons are recognized by their black face mask and black, brown, and white ringed bushy tail. They have long thick fur, a wide head, and a slender, pointed nose. The coat is a grizzled gray or brown. Male and females are colored alike, and males are generally larger than females. Adults average between 8 and 16 pounds, but may get up to 40 pounds in rare instances. Their feet are well adapted to climbing. Their forepaws are very sensitive to touch and they often stop to feel around in water as they wander along a stream in search of food.



Habitat and Behavior Raccoons live in forested areas that are close to fields or wetlands. They are often found near streams, lakes, and swamps, but are very adaptable and can exist in almost every sort of habitat where food is available, including suburban areas. They den in hollow trees or logs, rock crevices, deserted buildings, culverts, abandoned beaver lodges, or woodchuck burrows. More than one den may be used each year and the same den is often used year after year.

Raccoons are almost entirely nocturnal, but are most often seen at dawn or dusk. Although they spend winter months denning up, they are not true hibernators and may leave the den during winter warm spells. Raccoons do not store food like chipmunks, but they build up layers of body fat which are used to supply energy until spring.

Although classified as a carnivore, raccoons feed on a wide variety of plants and animals including frogs, fish, shellfish, insects, birds, nuts, fruits, seeds, corn, and other vegetables. In spring they feed mostly on animal matter, and in late summer, fall, and winter, they feed mainly on plants and seeds. Some favorite plant foods include apples, acorns, corn, oats, berries, grapes, ragweed, and tender shoots and buds. Animals commonly eaten include crayfish, frogs, snails, fish, snakes, insects, small birds and their eggs, shrews, mice, and carrion. In urban areas they frequently raid garbage and rubbish containers.



Most raccoons breed during January, February or March. The young are born about 63 days later. Litters of 3 to 7 cubs are born blind, but with fur. The cubs grow rapidly and open their eyes when they are about three weeks old. The mother and young remain together throughout the summer and may den together during the following winter.

Raccoons have few natural predators because of their relatively large size and their fighting and climbing abilities. While young raccoons are sometimes killed by owls, foxes, and weasels, man and dogs are the major predators of adults. Many raccoons are killed on roads each year and many young die from starvation, disease, and parasites during the winter. Hunting and trapping are strictly regulated to insure that only the surplus population is harvested each year.

EHS does not kill native wildlife. We perform our guaranteed "Live and Let Live" Non-lethal exclusion services. Call for details.

Written and compiled by Nan Chadwick