

June 1991

RACCOON (*Procyon lotor*)

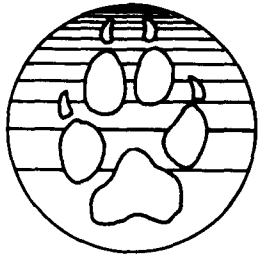
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NEBRASKA WILDLIFE

Nebraska Game and Parks Commission



RACCOON
(*Procyon lotor*)

Description: The common name "raccoon" comes from the Indian word "arakum" or "aracoun," meaning "he scratches with his hands." Adult raccoons may be up to 3 feet long and weigh up to 30 pounds. They have a black face mask and ringed tail. Their fur is long and dense, a grizzled brown and black color that has often been described as "salt and pepper." Although raccoons are flesh-eaters and have long canine teeth, their molar teeth are adapted for a varied diet which includes more than just meat. The raccoon's closest relatives are ringtails and coatis from the Southwest.

Raccoons are inquisitive and seldom pass up the opportunity to investigate an interesting smell or crevice. They probe a crack with their front feet and pull anything of interest from its hole for closer inspection.

Raccoons are usually found near trees because they are adapted to life in the forest. They are agile climbers and have

nimble feet, but they are flat-footed like humans and bears and are slow runners. Using their sensitive front feet, they catch prey in and around water, and use their front feet to bring food to their mouths and hold it while they eat.

Raccoons have well-developed senses of sight, hearing and smell.

Distribution and abundance: Raccoons are found across most of North America. They have long been common in the eastern United States, but less so in western states. In the 1940s, a continent-wide population explosion occurred as raccoons expanded their range and increased in abundance. There were at least 15 times more raccoons in North America in the 1980s than in the 1930s.

In Nebraska prior to 1940, raccoons were common only in the eastern third of the state and were relatively scarce elsewhere. Currently, raccoons are common statewide although they remain more abundant in eastern Nebraska. In western and central Nebraska, raccoons are most abundant along major rivers and streams.

Raccoons have adapted well to urban life and are among the most common wildlife species found in cities and towns.

Habitat and Home: Raccoons are primarily forest inhabitants and most trees in Nebraska grow near water, so raccoons here are usually associated with rivers and streams (riparian areas). Ideal raccoon habitat is a well-timbered area containing several large, mature trees and including a combination of grain crops and water.

Habits: Raccoons are among the most intelligent of wild animals. They are most active at night and their nightly travels depend upon where food is available and the prevailing weather conditions. The home range of an adult male is about one mile in diameter, although it expands in size during the breeding season. Adult females and their young inhabit smaller areas, and one male's home range often overlaps several females' home ranges. Adult males tend to be solitary, but family groups are quite social and will feed and den together into the fall. As family units disband, raccoons become increasingly solitary. Juveniles leave the area where they were born between the fall and spring of their first year and may travel 75 miles or more before settling in a new location.

Raccoons do not construct their own den sites, but rely on natural processes or the work of other animals. Traditionally, it was thought that raccoons primarily used hollow trees for winter den and spring birthing sites. Hollow trees are important, but studies show that raccoons will den in abandoned buildings, old beaver lodges or bank dens, car bodies, wood piles, abandoned badger and coyote dens and hay stacks. In the

Sandhills, a raccoon will even make a den in a dense stand of cattails.

Raccoons do not hibernate, but remain inactive for extended periods during severe winter weather. They will use communal or group dens during winter storms. A raccoon uses several dens within its home range. On summer days, it spends much of its time on the ground or sprawled on a large tree limb.

Depending on seasonal needs, most foraging is done in or near water or around the edges of cropfields. A raccoon hunts in shallow water by turning over rocks and limbs, and probing and grabbing with its front feet. It examines potential food items by manipulating them with its front feet and touching them with its nose.

Foods: Raccoons are omnivorous (they eat both animals and plants) and opportunistic; their diet is dictated by seasonal protein and energy needs and food availability. In spring, females feed primarily on high protein animal matter to insure development and growth of their young. Crayfish, insects, birds, eggs, fish and young rabbits are eaten when available. Later in the summer, after the young are weaned, the female's protein requirements are greatly reduced, allowing her to take advantage of a wide variety of fruits and vegetables including mulberries, sweet corn and plums.

With the cooler temperatures of fall, raccoons feed intensively to build fat reserves for winter. Energy-rich foods including nuts and grain (such as corn) and high protein foods are pursued at this time. In winter, raccoons feed on waste grain, carrion and assorted small animals and insects, but rely on fat reserves to sustain them during long periods of inactivity.

Reproduction: Breeding occurs between January and March, and peaks in February. Raccoons pair only to mate, and do not form long-term pair-bonds. Males will mate with more than one female and do not share in the rearing of young. Pregnancy lasts about nine weeks, and the young are weaned at seven to 10 weeks. The young begin to accompany their mother on excursions by early June.

In Nebraska, yearling female raccoons breed at a lower rate and have smaller litters than do older, adult females. Less than 70 percent of yearling females are bred, with average litter size of 3.3 young. Ninety-five percent of adult females are bred, and have an average of 4 young per litter. Breeding by adult females is relatively constant from year to year, while breeding by yearlings can be quite variable. Yearling breeding rates are thought to reflect the severity of the previous winter and the overall health of the population.

Mortality: Studies in Iowa show that survival of young raccoons from birth until September is about 65 percent, while survival from September through the following spring is 30 to 50 percent. Annual survival of adult raccoons is around 60 percent. Raccoons in the Midwest can sustain an annual harvest of up to 35 to 40 percent of the fall population.

The major causes of mortality for raccoons in the Midwest are fur harvest, collisions with motor vehicles and disease. Starvation is seldom an important population regulator in the Midwest. As fur harvest decreases, mortality from other causes will likely increase. The most important disease in raccoons in Nebraska is canine distemper, which can cause severe reductions in raccoon numbers in localized areas. Most sick raccoons reported in Nebraska are diagnosed as having distemper. Although the symptoms of distemper are similar to those of rabies, raccoons in Nebraska seldom are diagnosed as having rabies.

Importance: Raccoons seldom cause serious problems for homeowners, farmers or ranchers but their curious nature can be irritating. Trash cans and dog food containers must sometimes be modified to exclude raccoons. The raccoon's well-known love of corn usually causes only slight damage to field corn yields but sweet corn stands are sometimes decimated. Damage is usually controlled by removing the offending animals. Relocation of damage-causing raccoons is often preferable to killing them, particularly in urban situations. However, relocated raccoons don't compete well with established residents and have poor survival rates.

Raccoons sometimes prey upon the nests of ground-nesting birds such as ducks and pheasants, and on the nests of cavity-nesting birds such as bluebirds. However, predation is among the checks and balances of life in the wild. Severe predation is usually a symptom of other problems, such as a lack of suitable nesting habitat.

The raccoon is an important and valuable furbearer in Nebraska. From 1941 to 1989, more than 1.7 million raccoons were taken by fur hunters and trappers in Nebraska. Harvest totals from 1980 to 1989 indicate an average annual harvest of 73,000 raccoons with a total value of \$1,281,000. This represents over 50 percent of the average annual value of all furbearers harvested in Nebraska from 1980 to 1989.

Pelt prices for raccoons influence the harvest of all other furbearers. High raccoon pelt prices stimulate harvest of raccoons and other species. Many hunters enjoy pursuing and taking raccoons with hounds, and they take about 60 percent of the harvest; trappers take the remaining 40 percent. The raccoon's durable fur is used in the manufacture of coats, hats and trimming. Raccoon meat has excellent flavor when roasted, and thousands are eaten every year.

Management: Raccoons have adapted well to life in modern-day Nebraska, and the most useful habitat management techniques for raccoons are to restore riparian habitat along streams and rivers and to save large den trees.

