

RACCOONS DON'T ALWAYS SHUN CITIES

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Editor's note: This article originally appeared in the *Saskatoon Sun*.

The Raccoon is a greyish or brownish-black animal easily recognized by its black facial mask and ringed tail. The woolly brown undercoat is covered by long guard hairs. Adults have body lengths of 90 cm with tails up to 25 cm long. They average eight kilograms in weight. Their legs are relatively short and the feet are narrow, with five long, finger-like toes. The front feet are especially sensitive and agile. The Raccoon uses them skillfully to manipulate food and objects, hence the common name "Raccoon" which originates from its Algonquin name "Arakunem," meaning literally "he who scratches with his hands."

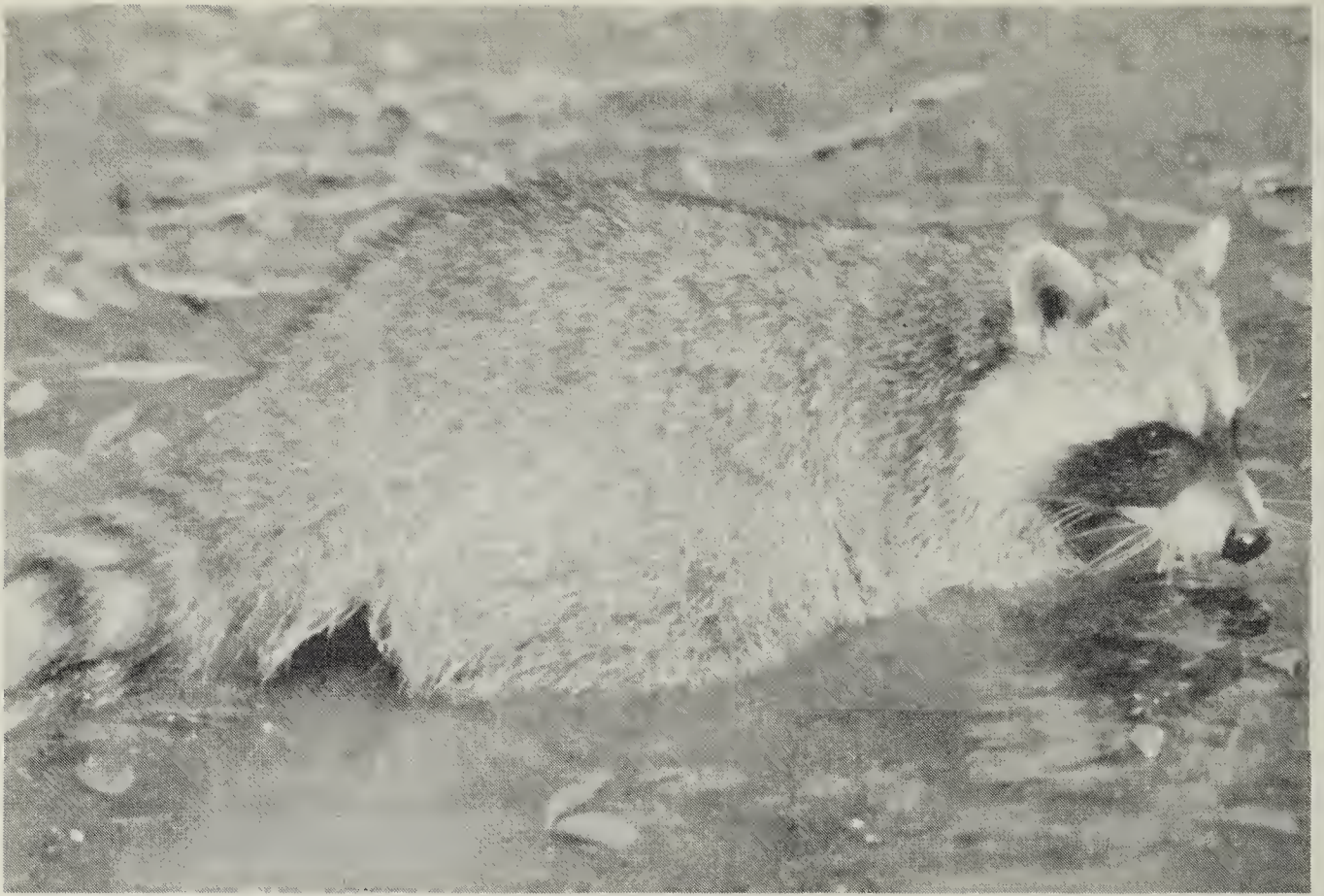
The young, usually three or four, are born in mid-April to mid-May. Their eyes remain closed for about three weeks. By six weeks the young leave the den to explore and feed. They remain together as a family through the first winter. The following spring, the young lose the instinct to follow their mother and soon disperse to begin life on their own.

The Raccoon is omnivorous. It will eat anything available, including carrion, garbage, birds, insects, crayfish and plant material. Contrary to popular belief, Raccoons in the wild do not wash all their food.

Raccoons are nocturnal. Because

they are most active at night, we don't often see them in the wild. They are colour blind, but have excellent night vision. They are good climbers and aggressive when threatened. Considered to be intelligent animals, they seem to have the ability to learn from experience and pass on learned behavior to other Raccoons. Raccoons are extremely adaptable and occur in a wide variety of habitats. Riparian habitat such as the South Saskatchewan River valley is important Raccoon habitat for den sites and as a travel route. They first appeared in southeast Saskatchewan following Coyote reduction programs of the 1950s, and have expanded dramatically north and west since. The Raccoon's relationship to the Coyote is emphasized by a study of waterfowl predators in Saskatchewan from 1983 to 1988, which showed a decline in the abundance of Raccoons with an increase in the abundance of Coyotes.

Raccoons are suited to co-existence with humans and have benefited greatly from agricultural and urban development. While the preferred habitat is forested areas near water, Raccoons may be found in upland forests, prairies and cities. Metropolitan Toronto has one of the highest densities of Raccoons in Canada. Raccoons' preference for wetland habitat makes them important predators of ducks and other waterbirds which nest near or over water. Their ability to climb allows



Raccoon

them to predate eggs of tree-nesting birds.

Raccoons use hollow trees, ground burrows, and abandoned buildings as dens for rearing young and for shelter. The Raccoon is not a true hibernator, but becomes inactive during severe winter weather. Raccoons often share dens to conserve warmth. They may store food, but they usually rely on body fat reserves, which make up to one-half of their fall body weight, to sustain them through inactive periods when snow depth limits available food. The last 10 years of relatively mild winters in Saskatchewan have contributed to Raccoon survival.

The Raccoon roundworm has been identified as a potential health hazard for humans, although the

Raccoon is not seriously affected by this internal parasite. However, ingestion of the eggs by an intermediate host, including man, can lead to health problems. Rabies and canine distemper are also important causes of Raccoon mortality. Because of their usual nocturnal nature, Raccoons encountered during daylight hours should be avoided.

Editor's note: As I was making the last corrections to this issue I was saddened to learn of the tragic death of Wally Kost and two of his colleagues. They were estimating deer populations when their light plane crashed. Many readers know Wally as a fine, energetic young man whose talents and contribution to society will be missed. Our sympathy goes to his wife, children and family.

