

Living with Wildlife – Raccoons

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With their mischievous-looking black face mask and ringed tail, Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) are familiar to just about everyone, although their nocturnal habits mean they are not often seen.

There are exceptions, however, as we sometimes got calls about the occasional raccoon seen lounging about in the afternoon sun. We knew it was invariably a female taking a much-needed break from her nursing young, something that callers who were mothers could easily relate to.

Raccoons are omnivorous, eating both plant and animal material. In fact, they have been highly successful in adapting because they take advantage of a wide variety of food sources.

In early spring, they will eat earthworms, insects and fruits like strawberries. They eat fish and aquatic animals like crayfish and clams, bird eggs and birds and, occasionally, small animals such as mice and squirrels but they are not very effective hunters. In late summer they rely on foods such as corn, fruit, acorns and other nuts to pack on the weight needed to get them through a long winter. Raccoons don't hibernate but they remain largely inactive during the coldest winter months, denning with family members for warmth.

Raccoons are at least as intelligent as cats or dogs and far more dexterous. Although the scientific name of the raccoon "lotor" refers to the "washing behaviour" demonstrated by its handling of food, it likely just highlights how tactile this animal is.

Raccoons den in hollow trees, logs and vacant burrows. During the birthing season, the female often moves closer to humans, choosing an accessible attic, chimney or shed to keep her young safe from predators. The babies, eyes closed and weighing only 75 grams, are born in April or May and continue nursing until they are 8-10 weeks old, although they often also start venturing out with mother at this time to learn how to forage.

We urge people never to relocate or barricade a raccoon or any other wild animal seen around their property. It is almost certainly a mother with young stashed nearby. It is a temporary situation. For experienced advice on all wildlife concerns, check out www.wildlifeinfo.ca BEFORE taking any action.

The raccoon is not an aggressive animal and it doesn't pose a threat to cats or dogs that it might encounter on its nightly prowl. Besides, raccoons are here to stay, so we ought to learn about the few easy measures it takes to coexist while appreciating the abundant greenspace and wildlife we are blessed with in Ottawa.