

WHO IS THAT MASKED BANDIT?

THE RACCOON – AN OPPORTUNISTIC CRITTER



Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) are medium sized carnivores (weighing 12 to 30 pounds), with a distinctive black face mask and ringed tail. The raccoon occurs throughout Tennessee and it is the official state mammal. They eat a variety of foods that include fruit, nuts, frogs, insects, grains, crawfish, bird eggs, mice and berries. In natural habitats raccoons will den in hollow trees and logs where they will spend the daylight hours, coming out at night to feed. The raccoon is highly opportunistic and will also den in buildings in urban and suburban areas. In these areas, they will take advantage of any food items available in dumpsters and garbage cans. They will also eat cat and dog food left outside for pets by homeowners. The abundance of potential den sites and readily available food sources in most urban/suburban areas artificially elevates normal raccoon densities found in rural areas from approximately 30 to 40 per square mile to more than 100 per square mile. The adaptability of the raccoon is well documented on the Oak Ridge Reservation where they have been known to den in old buildings and forage in dumpsters in large numbers. They have also been so brazen as to gain access to offices and break rooms during their nightly jaunts in search of choice food items. They have an uncanny ability to open containers, cabinets and even refrigerators to gain access to food.

Raccoon Controls:

The key to controlling raccoon populations in urban/suburban areas is to eliminate potential entryways into buildings and to cut off all potentially available food sources.

Raccoons will enter buildings where opportunities exist. Broken crawl space vent screens and other openings at the base of buildings will provide such entryways. They will gain entry through holes in roofs and soffits, and will climb down chimneys. Attics and chimneys are two typical den sites chosen by raccoons. Prevention is the main remedy to eliminate unwanted contact with raccoons. Branches overhanging buildings should be cut back to limit access to the roof and soffit areas. Chimney caps should be placed on all chimneys to prevent entry. Crawl space vents, roofs and soffits should be kept in good repair. There are two things to remember when dealing with a

nuisance raccoon situation in your work building or at home: 1) raccoons are nocturnal and will typically forage at night; 2) raccoons will generally have young in den sites (e.g., attics and chimneys) during April and May. Caution should be taken when closing up any existing openings, so as not to trap animals inside. If there are several points of entry, it is always good practice to leave one open for a day or two to assure that all animals are out. Fresh tracks can be detected in flour left at the entrance. After you are sure that the den is empty, you should seal the remaining entrance immediately. A one way door can also be constructed that will allow access out and not back in.

The existence of potential food sources in close proximity to den areas greatly increases the attractiveness of the area to raccoons. Garbage that contains a good variety of food scraps will act as a magnet for raccoons. To avoid creating a “banquet” area for these animals, all outside garbage receptacles should have fastened tight fitting lids. Dumpsters should be fitted with locks or latching devices that are commercially available. Raccoons that do become trapped in dumpsters can be afforded exit out by placing long boards at angles that provide climbing “ramps” for the animals.



Raccoons in a dumpster at ORNL

Artificial feeding of raccoons increases contact with people and their pets, which can lead to further nuisance problems. For this reason, raccoons should not be fed and all pet foods should be kept inside in a secure location.

Public Health Risks:

People need to be aware of certain health concerns associated with raccoons. The major one is rabies. The raccoon is one of four wild animals in the United States (including foxes, skunks and bats) considered to be primary carriers of the rabies virus. Typical signs of rabies in an infected animal include drooling, convulsions, circling, disorientation, partial paralysis, unprovoked aggression and uncharacteristic tameness. Raccoon strain rabies is contagious to humans, pets and other wildlife. Therefore, precautions should be taken to avoid contact with raccoons exhibiting the above symptoms and to always keep pets vaccinated. There are no recent raccoon rabies records from Anderson, Knox or Roane counties. However, raccoon strain rabies has been reported recently in a small number of raccoons, feral cats, and one skunk in surrounding east Tennessee counties.

Raccoons can also carry distemper and animals stricken with this disease will exhibit similar symptoms to rabies. Household pets (dogs and cats) are susceptible to distemper and should be properly vaccinated to avoid the potential for sickness. Distemper is not contagious to humans.

Raccoon roundworm is also a human health concern. This parasite is transmitted through the ingestion or inhalation of eggs passed in the raccoon feces. This is a particular concern for children that may be playing in an area of heavy raccoon activity.

Direct confrontation and handling of raccoons should always be avoided due to the potential health and safety concerns.

Contacts:

- At ORNL
 - If you encounter a sick raccoon or experience a nuisance problem on the ORNL campus, please contact the Laboratory Shift Superintendent (LSS) at 574-6606.
- AT Home
 - If you experience a raccoon nuisance problem at your home, contact a pest control businesses that specializes in nuisance wildlife and wildlife damage control. These businesses are listed in the yellow pages for example under the heading “Pest Control Services”.
 - Any suspected raccoon rabies occurrences outside of work should be reported to the local health department or animal control offices listed in the Blue Pages under Government Offices.
 - If you or someone you know is bitten or scratched by a raccoon, wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water, and seek immediate medical attention.