



Extension FactSheet

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Preventing and Managing Raccoon Problems

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Raccoons are medium-sized mammals that usually are 2–3 feet in length and weigh 10–30 pounds. They are easily recognized by the distinctive black “mask” over their eyes and a black-and-gray ringed tail. Raccoons are found throughout the United States but are most common in the East. Although raccoons were once strongly associated with forested areas near water, today they can be found in many habitats, including parks, suburban areas, and farms. In these areas, they will den in hollow trees, ground burrows, brush piles, barns, buildings, dense vegetation, haystacks, rock crevices, or chimneys. Raccoons also eat a wide variety of foods, such as small mammals, birds, snakes, lizards, insects, acorns, fruit, corn, and grass. For this reason, raccoons can be frequent, and sometimes troublesome, nocturnal visitors to backyards, garbage cans, field crops, gardens, and poultry houses. In fact, some studies show that densities of raccoons can be twenty times higher in urban areas than in rural environments.

As with all nuisance wildlife problems and damage concerns, changing your level of tolerance is the easiest solution. However, you must ultimately decide what level of damage warrants action. If you choose to manage your raccoon problems, remember that there seldom are quick solutions. The key to success is persistence.

Damage Prevention and Control

Four basic rules for controlling raccoon damage are: (1) remove food supply, (2) remove water supply (e.g., pet water bowls), (3) modify habitat and reduce access, and (4) trap or use lethal control responsibly.

Exclusion

Whenever possible, exclusion is the best method for preventing raccoon damage.

Crops and gardens. Electric fencing (single or double hot-wire arrangement) can be very effective at excluding raccoons from crops and gardens. The fence should be turned on in the evening (before dusk) and turned off after sunrise. If you decide to use electric fencing, be sure to install caution signs where appropriate. In smaller gardens, using reinforced filament tape (with glass-yarn filaments) to secure the corn to the stalk can be extremely successful at preventing raccoon damage.

Chimneys and rooftops. Prevent raccoons from entering your chimney by securely fastening a commercial cap of sheet metal and heavy screen over the top of the chimney. Before you install the exclusion device, however, be sure that the animals are not already inside the chimney, especially in the spring or summer when young may also be present. If the animals are still inside the chimney, you will have to wait for them to leave or contact a wildlife control expert or chimney sweep. Remember that young raccoons are born blind and helpless, so you should be as humane as possible when dealing with raccoon families. You may be able to evict the raccoons with loud noise, bright lights, or a pan of ammonia in the fireplace. Raccoon access to rooftops can be limited by pruning back overhanging branches and by wrapping and nailing sheets of slick metal at least 3 feet square around corners of buildings (to prevent them from climbing).

Attics and buildings. Raccoons can enter structures through vents or other openings. The minimum size opening that raccoons need for access is only 2.5 x 4 inches—surprisingly small! Replace damaged and vulnerable roof and ventilation vents with designs that prevent entry. You may modify some vents with homemade screens, though raccoons will likely remove any that are not fastened securely.

Garbage cans. Store garbage in metal or tough plastic containers with tight-fitting lids. Lids also can be wired, weighted, or clamped. Be sure that the raccoons cannot tip the cans over to gain access. If necessary, keep the garbage cans inside a secure building at night.

Poultry houses and yards. Exclude raccoons with tightly covered doors and windows, mesh-wire fences with an overhang, or electric fencing.

Scare Tactics

Unfortunately, most frightening devices only work temporarily. Common techniques used to scare raccoons include radios, bright lights, dogs, plastic streamers, and aluminum pie pans.

Repellents

There are no repellents, toxicants, or fumigants registered for raccoon control.

Trapping

Sometimes trapping can be an effective way to deal with a “problem” raccoon. Nuisance or sick raccoons can be trapped, but check with state and local authorities for

current policies. The Ohio Department of Natural Resources—Division of Wildlife has several provisions that must be followed when trapping wild animals. The most commonly used trap is a cage-like device that captures the animal without physical harm. These traps can be purchased, built by you, or loaned from some Division of Wildlife district offices. Traps can be baited with canned cat food (especially fish-flavored), sardines, fish, or chicken. Check the trap frequently (at least twice each day) to prevent undue stress to the captured animal. Captured raccoons can be moved to other locations or euthanized (required if rabies or distemper is present in your county). If you decide to trap, be aware that raccoons can transmit rabies, canine distemper, and parvovirus to domestic animals and humans. You should avoid any raccoon that is active during daylight hours, is unafraid of humans, or appears sick, confused, or uncoordinated. In these cases, consult a wildlife professional for assistance.

Shooting

Lethal control is often not necessary, and you should try other alternatives first. You must check with state and local authorities before using lethal control.

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