

The Outside Story



Spring Raccoons

By: Meghan McCarthy McPhaul

Often, during my forays into the woods behind our house, I wonder who might be occupying the holes carved into tree trunks by time and nature. The barred owls I hear hoo-hoo-hoo-hooing, maybe, or the chattering red squirrels. And, chances are, there are raccoons in some of those hollows, high above the ground.

“Raccoons don’t make a den, they just find a place to be during the winter, wherever they can find shelter,” said Dave Erler, a senior naturalist at Squam Lakes Natural Science Center in Holderness, New Hampshire. “Large enough tree hollows, about 20 to 30 feet off the ground, would probably be their first choice.”

While raccoons don’t hibernate, they do curl up for much of the winter, having fattened themselves up as much as possible before snow covered the landscape. Erler has seen raccoons using abandoned woodchuck burrows and beaver lodges, and they’ll also take shelter in barns, attics, and chimneys.

The exception to this holing up comes during breeding season, which typically happens, depending a bit on a raccoon’s age and the weather, between January and March.

“Usually the first warm spell we have in February is when you start seeing the tracks,” Erler said. “As soon as it cools off, raccoons go back in and go to sleep again. Their paws are not furred out like a lot of other animals, so they’re not going to be hanging around outside when it’s 20 below.”

While raccoons do not form lasting pair bonds – both males and females will mate with multiple partners in the same breeding cycle – the mating process may last several days. Male raccoons seek out females and will make themselves right at home in a female’s denning area for as long as a couple of weeks. Once the male finally wanders off, the female will likely return to sleeping until it’s time for the kits to be born.

The gestation for raccoons is about 63 days, putting the birthday for the year’s young typically at some time in April. Raccoons have litters of between two and seven babies, with four being the most common.

The kits are helpless at birth, weighing only a few ounces and with eyes closed, ears pressed tightly to their heads, and only a fuzz of fur for protection. They are totally dependent on their mother for food and warmth. By about six weeks of age, they start to walk, run, and even climb, but they are still mostly confined to the den where they were born and still rely on their mother.

“They’re dependent on her to bring home the groceries,” said Erler. “She has to leave them unattended to look for food.”

Nocturnal by nature, the mother does most of her hunting by cover of darkness, although with hungry mouths to feed, she may occasionally hunt by day.

E.B. White, that writer of fantastic children's novels and poignant essays, was also a great observer of nature. His essay, *Coon Tree*, penned in 1956, gives a lovely description of a mother raccoon occupying a tree hollow in his yard with her kits:

"There are two sides to a raccoon—the arboreal and the terrestrial. When a female coon is in the tree, caring for young, she is one thing. When she descends and steps off onto solid earth to prowl and hunt, she is quite another. In the tree she seems dainty and charming; the circles under her eyes make her look slightly dissipated and deserving of sympathy. The moment she hits the ground, all this changes; she seems predatory, sinister, and as close to evil as anything in Nature (which contains no evil) can be."

Any parent of small children – of any species – can likely relate to White's sympathetic description of a harried mother looking after rambunctious and constantly-hungry children.

By around two months of age, sibling raccoons will engage in play fighting, complete with vocalization. Perhaps coincidentally, it's around this time that mother raccoons lead their kits out of the den to learn about the world – and the food options – around them.

Raccoons are omnivorous, eating everything from berries and fruit to frogs and rodents, along with scraps from the compost pile, garbage from the inadequately secured trash can, and whatever else they can get their clever little paws into.

"One of the reasons raccoons have been so successful is that they're so adaptable," said Erler. "They're very curious. They're intelligent. And they're so nimble with those front paws."

The curious kits stay with mother raccoon through the summer and sometimes bunk up with her again during their first winter. Erler has seen half a dozen raccoons emerge, one after the other, from a

woodchuck burrow. White wrote that a succession of mother raccoons and their babies occupied the same hollow for many years running. I've seen raccoon tracks in the melting spring snow and found their masked mugs on my game camera. Perhaps, somewhere nearby, I have my own coon tree.

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