

Raccoons



Urban Wildlife Damage Control



Raccoons (*Procyon lotor*) are abundant throughout Kansas. The black face mask and ringed tail are its distinguishing characteristics. The print of the hind foot faintly resembles that of a child (*Figure 1, page 2*).

Biology and Habits

Adult raccoons in Kansas weigh 8 to 49 pounds and measure 26 to 38 inches long. Most breeding takes place in February, and with a gestation period of 63 days, young are born April and May. There is usually one litter per year of 4 to 7 young.

At birth, the young, furry animals weigh about 2¼ ounces. They are born blind, but their eyes open within 30 days. Young raccoons stay in the den until they are 8 to 10 weeks old. They are weaned in August.

Raccoons prefer wooded areas near streams, rivers or other water sources. They are omnivorous and eat a variety of foods, among them small animals such as crayfish, clams, fish, frogs, snails, small mammals and insects; and vegetables and fruits including cherries, apples, nuts and grains.

Like many other animals, raccoons are opportunists, eating pet food, garbage or other foods they find in urban and suburban areas.

Urban Raccoon Problems

Most, if not all, towns and cities across Kansas have raccoons living within the city limits. Because raccoons move around and feed at night, they are seldom seen.

Of all the wild animals that have adapted to city life, raccoons are probably the most destructive. These so-called “masked bandits” often raid garbage cans. It is not uncommon to find places where raccoons have torn off roofing to get into attics. Once they get in, minor repairs will not keep them from tearing in again.

The real destruction begins once raccoons are in the attic. They tear and scatter insulation and chew holes through the walls. Their waste accumulates and creates an odor problem. It may even cause the ceiling to fall.

Raccoons find ready-made summer dens in the fireplaces of many homes. They resemble a hollow log, the raccoon’s normal home in the woods. They may bear young in the chimney.

Diseases

Raccoons contract a number of diseases. Distemper occasionally causes raccoons to decline in some locations, but studies show that this is not as common as once thought. Raccoons often are exposed to canine, feline and porcine parvovirus, but to date there is no evidence that raccoons have transmitted this disease to pets or livestock.

In Kansas only about 5 percent of raccoons have been exposed to rabies. Exposure means that those tested have rabies antibodies in their blood, indicating they have been attacked but not killed by the virus and they cannot infect other animals. Raccoons are extremely resistant to the skunk-strain rabies common in the Midwest.

Recently there has been concern about the raccoon roundworm, (*Baylisascaris*) because trappers and hunters who accidentally touch the

feces might be exposed. Roundworms have been found in more than 65 percent of the raccoons tested in Iowa.

Humans are infected by ingesting eggs contained in the feces, possibly by not washing hands after working in or around a contaminated area. Clinical symptoms depend on how many larvae there are and where they migrate. Larvae migrate to various tissues but cause problems when they enter the eyes or brain. Most adults do not ingest enough eggs to cause brain disease.

Laws and Regulations

Raccoons are classified as furbearers in Kansas. Under KSA 32-1002, problem raccoons can be controlled without a permit.

This law does not prevent “owners or legal occupants of land from killing any animals when found in or near buildings on their premises, or when found destroying property, subject to the following:

(A) the provisions of all federal laws and regulations governing protected species and provisions of

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- Bats, L-855
- Birds, L-856
- Blackbirds in Roosts, L-857
- Cottontail Rabbits, L-858
- Muskrats, L-859
- Opossums, L-860
- Raccoons, L-861**
- Skunks, L-862
- Tree Squirrels, L-863
- Snakes, L-864
- Woodchucks, L-865
- Woodpeckers, L-866
- Woodrats, L-867

front foot



hind foot



4 1/2 inches

Figure 1. Raccoon paw prints

the Kansas nongame and endangered species conservation act are met;

(B) it is unlawful to use or possess with intent to use, any animal so killed unless authorized by rules and regulations of the secretary; and

(C) such owners or legal occupants shall make reasonable efforts to alleviate their problems with any such animals before killing them.”

Raccoon Problem Management

Frightening Devices

Because raccoons are nocturnal, using various frightening devices such as lights, noise makers or playing a radio during the night can reduce damage. These methods are not effective for long because raccoons adapt to them.

Food and Cover Reduction

A long term solution is to manage your home so you don't invite raccoon problems in the first place. You can do this by not leaving pet food outside at night and placing garbage in sealed metal containers, for example.

You can also cap the chimney so raccoons and other wild creatures cannot get in and remove trees growing next to the house. If you know animals jump from a tree onto your roof, place a sheet of slick tin on the roof's edge at that spot so animals will lose their footing and not be able

to get onto the roof. Seal up all holes along the foundation and under steps.

Raccoons and Gardens

Raccoons are known for eating sweet corn. Somehow they seem to know when corn is ripe and ready for harvesting. Broken stalks or open husks indicate raccoon damage.

Second to sweet corn, raccoons like watermelons. They dig through the rind, reach in and pull out the contents with their paws.

Fencing

Fencing is a good way to keep raccoons from harvesting your garden crops. Because of their climbing ability, woven wire fences do not effectively discourage raccoons from going after sweet corn (*Figure 2, opposite page*).

Adding electric wires turns woven wire into an effective barrier. Just be sure woven wire is grounded. This also makes the electric portion more effective if an animal comes in contact with both.

By using a little imagination, you can discourage nuisance raccoons with an electric fence. Always use an electric fence with safety in mind. Use a charger with a seal of approval from Underwriters Laboratories Inc. (UL), and do not use it where children or the public might come in contact with it. After you have decided that electric fencing is safe in your situation, attach warning signs.

Trapping

Cage-type live traps are the best way to capture problem raccoons, especially in an urban setting. A 15 by 15 by 36-inch single-door live trap baited with fish, fish based pet food, meat or eggs is sufficient.

If there are many house cats in the area, these baits will attract them, too. To avoid catching house cats, use grape jelly, peanut butter or sweet rolls. With jelly, smear it along a path leading into the trap and place some in a paper cup at the back, beyond the trigger.

The best type of raccoon cage trap is strong and well constructed with smaller double-wire mesh surrounding the rear portion. This prevents the raccoon from reaching into the trap from the outside. Because raccoons are very strong animals, it is a good idea to anchor the trap firmly in place.

Many homeowners prefer to release raccoons unharmed in a distant location, “where the animal can find a good home.” Recently, there has been growing opposition to relocating wild animals because of the possibility of introducing diseases from one population to another and the fact that a relocated raccoon may be forced out of the new area by other raccoons and not have a good chance for survival.

The question is often asked: “How far do I need to take a raccoon in order to prevent its returning to this same area?” The answer may be more than 25 miles. Studies have shown that relocated raccoons tend to create problems in new areas.

Some states require euthanasia for trapped nuisance raccoons.

Movements

Most daily movements of raccoons are within a relatively small area called a “home range.” According to researchers in Iowa, males normally have home ranges no larger than 2 square miles. Female ranges do not exceed 1.4 square miles, and juveniles' are even smaller, about 0.6 square miles at most.

Depending upon the availability of resources such as food, rest and denning sites, home ranges of raccoons in other states may vary considerably. In general, ranges are smaller where resources are plentiful.

Home ranges also become smaller as winter approaches. During extremely cold winter days, raccoons are not as active. They do not go into hibernation but sleep for several days at a time, awakening to eat, drink or defecate. They may lose more than 25 percent of their body weight during

the winter months. Movement outside the den becomes more frequent during mating in January and February and as spring approaches.

There are two times of the year—in the fall and in the spring—when individual raccoons may change their residence in movements called “dispersals.” These movements normally occur only once. When the raccoons have found a new home, they usually stay permanently.

In a recent Iowa study, most of these moves were from 5 to 9 miles,

although there was a report of a raccoon moving 81 miles. Another report from Minnesota indicated a raccoon had moved 200 miles.

Although some relocations occur annually, less than 10 percent of the animals in a population actually move.

When removing raccoons and their nests from chimneys:

- Wear disposable gloves and a dust mask. Wearing a dust mask is necessary so that fecal material or eggs are not inhaled accidentally.
- Try to remove the bulk of the fecal matter without stirring up a lot of dust.
- After removing raccoons, along with most of the feces, build a hot fire in the fireplace to kill remaining eggs.
- Fresh feces is not directly infective; it takes 30 days for the eggs to embryonate.
- Dispose of fecal matter properly by burning or burying in a landfill. A portable propane torch may be used to decontaminate cages and similar areas.
- Vacuum filters trap eggs and are difficult to wash out. These should be routinely disposed of if there is a possibility of them being contaminated.
- Using chimney screens or screen covers is a good way to discourage raccoons from nesting in chimneys.
- Keeping or giving away baby raccoons as pets is illegal.

For additional information write Wildlife Damage Control, 131 Call Hall, Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas 66506-1600, (785) 532-5734 .



Figure 2. Adding a two-wire electric fence will help keep raccoons out of field or garden crops. Inset shows the “ribbon-type” electric fence used in place of the single-wire type. This ribbon fence is more visible to raccoons and other wildlife and may improve control.

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