

# RACCOONS

The **raccoon** (*Procyon lotor*) is a familiar animal, regarded fondly by some for its cuddly appearance, and less fondly by others for the problems it creates for gardeners, home owners, and farmers. It is the size of a small dog, with a stocky, hunch-backed appearance, and is known for its distinctive black mask and bushy tail with alternating dark and pale rings. Its fur is thick, black, and white-tipped, which gives it a frosted, grey appearance. The muzzle is pointed and the ears are prominent and rounded. The front paws are hand-like, and the rear paws are elongate with long toes, producing flat-footed tracks. Males and females look very similar, but males are on average 10-15% larger.

Raccoons are omnivorous. Their natural diet includes insects, small mammals, amphibians, fish, inter-tidal mollusks and crustaceans and fruit and seeds. They are able to find food by touch, using sensitive front paws, probing beneath rocks and logs. In urban or agricultural areas, raccoons readily switch to what is at hand and is easy to obtain, including crops (fruit trees, corn fields, garden crops), fish from ornamental ponds, farmed poultry, grain from bird feeders, human food waste and pet food left outside overnight.



Raccoons are most active at night but may be out in daytime. They are excellent climbers and can easily scale fences and access rooftops.

The raccoon is widespread across North America, absent only from high elevations and the far north. It usually lives near a permanent source of water. Raccoons do not hibernate, but may become less active in cold spells. Preferred natural nesting and sleeping sites are tree hollows and hollow logs, but raccoons will also nest in caves, hollows among root balls, and brush heaps. In suburban landscapes, raccoons may seek out dry, quiet dark cavities in structures such as attics, unused chimneys, crawl spaces or unkempt wood piles and junk yards.

## History and Habitat in Richmond

Raccoons are common throughout Richmond's residential areas and parks. They have probably been in the Lower Mainland, including what is now Richmond, at least as long as humans have, although their present population likely surpasses numbers of the recent or distant past. Among North American wild mammals, the raccoon is the one most closely associated with man-made habitation, and reaches its highest densities in cities and agricultural areas. Cities and farms provide food and shelter where most of the raccoon's natural predators—wolves, foxes, cougars and bobcats—have been eliminated. There are coyotes in Richmond, a relatively recent arrival and potential raccoon predator, but whose primary prey is small mammals such as mice and voles.



## Conflict with People



### Gardens

Apart from taking advantage of back yard features such as bird feeders, fish ponds, fruit trees and vegetable gardens, raccoons are adept at accessing garbage and compost bins. They are clever, able to problem solve, and can open containers that foil most other animals. They can be a persistent foe, but it may be possible to deter them using sturdy

fencing with openings covered with chicken wire, motion-activated hoses, radios, or lights, or a combination of these. If there are obvious attractants present, such as overflowing bird feeders or pet food left outside, those should be removed.

Raccoons can be bold, and will stand up to dogs and house cats. They may even consider small dogs and cats as potential prey. This is one reason why cats should be kept indoors, especially at night, when raccoons are most active.

### Lawns

Raccoons are partly responsible for the extensive damage done to lawns in Richmond in recent years. Using their nimble hands, they are able to roll back sheets of sod. As with skunks, which dig in lawns, they are seeking the larvae of the European Chafer Beetle, which over the past decade has spread throughout the city. There is no sure-fire solution to the problem of lawn damage by raccoons and other animals searching for chafer beetle larvae, because the answer lies in controlling the beetle, a problem that requires a combination of measures. One partial remedy is to apply nematodes, which are microscopic roundworms, available at garden supply stores, to the lawn in the third week of July, when the larvae of the beetles are hatching. The nematodes will kill the beetle larvae if the lawn is kept moist for at least two weeks, which may require an exemption from lawn-watering restrictions. Further information on chafer beetle control is provided on the [City of Richmond Invasive Species](#) page.

### Dens

Raccoons may move into houses, garages and sheds to escape inclement weather or to give birth and raise young, which may cause physical damage to property and leave an unsanitary aftermath. This problem is easier to prevent than to remedy. Protecting your house means making it a less friendly potential denning site than surrounding houses. This can be done by checking the state of chimney caps, the closure of soffits, and the coverings of ventilation panels under soffits, porches, and crawl spaces. Overhanging branches of tall trees should be cut back to reduce access to the roof.

If a raccoon is observed entering a house or other building, or has established a den but young have not been born, it may be encouraged to leave by the installation of motion sensitive lights or a loud radio set to a talk station. A perforated plastic container filled with rags soaked with apple vinegar or ammonia placed within the den is also a gentle means of saying move along. Once sure the den is vacant, the entry should be sealed.

Although raccoons are considered a "Pest Species" under the B.C Wildlife Act, and may be removed from a property if they are a nuisance, there are laws governing how this can be done. It is illegal to poison raccoons (or any wildlife). They may be trapped, in season, by registered trappers with a valid trapping licence. A mother and babies may not be removed from their nesting site until the young are able to leave with the mother, at about 12 weeks. The BCSPCA recommends contacting a professional animal control company, preferably a BCSPCA-accredited [Animalkind Wildlife Control Operator](#) who uses humane methods such as exclusion rather than trapping and relocating.

### Latrines

Raccoons designate certain spots as "latrines," which can become unpleasant messes. Even if outside a home, in a garden or the corner of a driveway or patio, a raccoon latrine may be a problem. Raccoons can carry a parasitic roundworm whose eggs may be present in their feces, which if ingested, or inhaled from fecal dust, can cause serious illness in humans. Care should be taken in cleaning up latrines. Wear rubber gloves and a dust mask, and before starting spray dry feces with water to prevent dust. Clean the area thoroughly with a strong bleach solution. Alternatively, an animal control company may be contacted to clean up the latrine. Motion sensitive lights or sprinklers may be installed to prevent further usage.



### Rabies

Rabies in Raccoons is serious issue in eastern North America, but is not known in B.C. Nevertheless, if bitten or scratched by a raccoon it is best to seek medical advice.

### Additional Information

- [BCSPCA best practices for dealing with problem raccoons](#)
- [Animalkind Accreditation](#) (how to find a humane animal control company)
- [BC Wildlife Act – Raccoons](#)

