



Critters in Our Midst: Raccoons by Carol Ellis

Seeing a raccoon out during the day does not mean it is rabid or dangerous. If it is quiet, and few people or dogs are around, it may come out to forage for food.

I admit it. It was an innocent mistake, your Honor. I plead guilty of feeding the wildlife. It's just my spoiled indoor cats refused to eat the little crunchies of kibble left in the bottom of the bowl. It was no more than a tablespoon worth, but I tossed it onto the ground. I'm sorry.

I realized my error when upon return to the scene of my transgression, a giant raccoon was scratching the ground where I had thrown the kibble. This Northern Raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) looked pretty healthy. Its fur was bushy and there were no obvious scratches. I stood in the shadows of the garage and watched from a safe distance as I didn't want the critter to take offense and come after me. It turned its head toward me; its brown eyes with black fur surrounding its eyes; the raccoon looked like a burglar caught in the act of stealing, in broad daylight no less.

Urban wildlife is not rare,

it's only difficult to see. Animals stay hidden during the day in nearby natural habitat or in quiet crevices around the home, then come out at night to forage. That's why we call them night critters. Proof of their work can be seen in the morning as shown by overturned garbage cans



Nimble paws and a keen sense of touch helps the raccoon find its food. The raccoon's scientific name is *Procyon lotor*, when translated means "washing bear." When a raccoon wets its paws, the water stimulates the nerve endings and heightens their sense of touch.

with the contents strewn across the driveway.

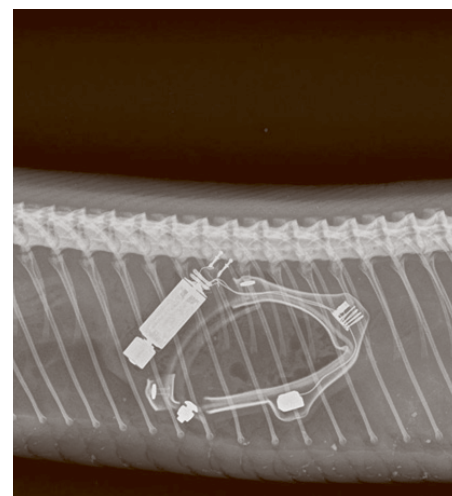
My yard is a pretty happy, nutritious place for critters to live. There are lots of native plants and fruit trees, a pond with frogs, crawly insects, small lizards, snakes and nesting birds that all reside there.

It is best to let wildlife forage naturally, but the crafty raccoon has adapted to begging for food in urban areas. Perhaps this raccoon's well-nourished state is courtesy of the resort's kitchen dumpster.

My suspicion was confirmed as a result of research conducted at Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge, to see how human activities relating to unsecured trash and feral cat feeding stations influence the movements of raccoons and possums. They trapped local possums and raccoons, fit them with radio collars and released them in the area where they were captured. Researchers found out a

number of these animals with collars would go up to Ocean Reef and eat each night.

Researchers had a serendipitous discovery when in September 2022, a GPS collar attached to a possum gave off a mortality signal, which is emitted when an animal goes several hours without moving when it should be active. The signal began moving, and it continued to stop and then move again over the period of a few days. The researchers discovered that a Burmese python was responsible, as it had eaten the possum and the radio collar was now inside the snake. They changed the focus of the collared raccoon and possum research toward tracking python.



An x-ray image of a python taken by researchers in Key Largo shows a GPS collar that had been fitted on a local opossum. Photo by: Kelly Crandall

Since 1995 when the Burmese python arrived in the Everglades, there has been a decline of 85% to 100% of the population of medium sized furry animals such as raccoons and rabbits due to the python. When the python swam 25 miles south to their new hunting grounds in North Key Largo, small furry creatures such as the Key Largo woodrat

Raccoons... CONTINUED Photos by Carol Ellis, except as noted.



A group of raccoons on the edge of the woods. This black and white photo is very much how a raccoon would perceive the world, since their vision is rendered in greyscale.

began disappearing. Camera traps placed inside woodrat nests provided evidence when a python preying on a woodrat was caught on video.

Raccoons have few natural enemies other than man, and automobiles kill more raccoon than anything. Luckily for the raccoon, urban food resources do allow these mesopredators - medium sized carnivorous animals such as raccoon and possum - to occur at much higher densities than the



The base of a hollowed out tree provides a suitable place for a raccoon den.

natural environment supports, which could indirectly help them sustain some of the python pressure compared to that in the Everglades.

Animal survival success depends on how well they adapt to life with humans. The greatest concern with raccoons is the diseases and parasites they carry. Canine distemper and rabies will kill raccoons, and raccoon diseases can affect unvaccinated pets. The risk of rabies is small. The Monroe County Health Department, whose records go back to 2012, reports there have been no cases of rabies in Monroe County.

According to the April/May 1988 editions of *The Ocean Reef News*:

"The fourth case of rabies in two months occurred in Key Largo March 4th, 1988. Two confirmed cases determine whether an epidemic rating is issued. Rabies, or neurotropic rhabdo virus, has been documented in raccoons at mile markers 101, 99 and two cases at mile marker 94,



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This baby raccoon was seen high in a tree, its fur was still wet from days of tropical rains.

Key Largo. In each case raccoons approached humans during daytime hours acting erratically. Soon after, the animals were found dead and diagnosed in post-mortem as having rabies."

"Monroe County health professionals warn county residents to avoid all wild or unvaccinated animals and this, unfortunately includes squirrels. While many residents possess great affection toward squirrels and their antics, the very treat you present to a squirrel may act as an invitation to less desirable animals."



This collared raccoon was known as "Fighter" - he was covered with scars; a truly wild raccoon who never went into people-occupied areas, such as neighborhoods or the waste transfer station. There aren't many raccoons like him anywhere in the world. Photo by: Mike Cove