



## Raccoons

by Michelle Le Strange, Master Gardener Program

Humans, plants, and animals in the Central Valley are all affected by the current drought situation. Animals that typically live in the wild have moved closer to human residential areas in search of food, water, and shelter. I've been an avid cyclist in this area since 1985, and this summer my friends and I encountered more coyotes, deer, foxes, wild pigs, wild turkeys, raccoons, and even black bears in the lower foothills than we can remember.

All of these critters are wondrous to look at, but when they get too close to your home and take up residence, they can cause some real property damage. Let's shed a little light on the raccoon, a creature that really prefers wooded areas near water, but an animal that adapts extremely well to suburban and urban environments. Much of the information mentioned here comes from a University of California Pest Note on Raccoons, written by wildlife specialists T.P. Salmon, D.A. Whisson, and R.E. Marsh. This information is available for download at: <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu>.

Raccoons are stocky mammals that grow 2 to 3 feet long and weigh between 10 and 30 pounds. They are easy to recognize because their thick fur bears distinctive markings such as the "black mask" over the eyes and alternating light and dark rings around their tails. These nocturnal animals are active all year-round, but take cover in dens during cold winter weather. Dens are usually in hollow trees, brush or rock piles, and in the ground. However, raccoons also easily make themselves comfortable in attics, chimneys and other hiding spaces near homes. Young are typically born in the spring and litter size ranges from 3 to 6 "kits," which remain together as a family for the first year before they become independent. It is easy to imagine that if food and shelter is ample, then raccoon populations can become very large and can create quite a nuisance.

These animals are omnivorous in the wild, eating both plants and animals. Fruits, berries, nuts, acorns, corn and other grains are preferred over plant leaves and stems. Snails, insects, frogs, baby birds and eggs, fish, turtles, rabbits, and muskrats make up their animal food. In human settings, they scavenge from garbage cans and compost piles, gobble up pet food, and raid vegetable gardens and backyard orchards.

The damage to gardens is typically minor compared to the potential damage a raccoon or a family of raccoons can do to a house. Females rip off shingles and rooftop ventilators to gain attic access for their dens. Then they destroy insulation, air and heating ducts, while they are feasting, defecating, and stinking up the place. Adding



The raccoon (*Procyon lotor*) is native to North America. Pictured here is an adult.



Raccoon paws are hand-like, with long toes that are dexterous.

to the problem is that they carry a number of diseases, including rabies, and internal parasites that sometimes spread to people.

Okay, so raccoons are wonderful creatures in the wild, but not in your home. Prevention is always easier than control. If you live where raccoons are likely to visit you, then be on the lookout and try to scare them away before they move in. Frightening devices and repellent products only work for a few weeks at best. Efforts to reduce available food, such as securing trash cans and removing access to pet food will help. Exclusion is key to eliminating den sites, but be aware that raccoon paws are hand-like, with toes that are long, flexible, and considerably dexterous; they are known to unhook simple latches. Remember too, that raccoons are wild, powerful animals that become vicious when cornered.



Raccoons dig up lawns in search of insect larvae, especially beetle grubs.

Ordinary fences will not keep raccoons from gardens or yards, but a low, two-wire electric fence can be very effective for excluding raccoons from gardens, crops, trees, koi ponds, and even newly sodded lawns. A pulsating high-voltage, low-amperage fence charger, similar to that used for confining cattle is used to electrify the fence. The fence charger needs to be activated from dusk to dawn.

What can you do if you have a problem? Raccoons causing damage may be taken at any time by legal means, as determined by the California Department of Fish and Game. They may also be legally trapped. Although they are cunning and intelligent animals, they are relatively easy to catch in a “live cage-type” trap with the right bait. The tricky part is what to do with the live animal? Legally, you are not allowed to relocate and release a raccoon, even if you think the site is its “natural” home.

In other parts of California, some cities are heavily inundated with high populations of raccoons. At that point, it becomes a concerted effort to handle an area-wide raccoon problem. You can now understand that trapping and releasing only moves the problem to a different area, and just further exacerbates the situation. Luckily, raccoon problems are fairly isolated around here.

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