



Mississippi Delta Raccoon - *Procyon lotor megalodous*

There are 22 subspecies of raccoon, all are native only to North and South America. Humans brought raccoons to other countries around the world. You'll see the Mississippi Delta Raccoon at Palmetto island State Park. This subspecies is found in the coastal region of southern Louisiana from St. Bernard Parish west to Cameron Parish.

Raccoons are round, fuzzy creatures with bushy tails and a black mask of fur that covers their eye area. These animals may look like cute, cuddly bandits, but they can be quite fearsome when approached. Raccoons are sometimes kept as pets, which is discouraged by many experts because the raccoon is not a domesticated species. Raccoons may act unpredictably and aggressively and it is extremely difficult to teach them to obey commands. Their propensity for unruly behavior exceeds that of captive skunks, and they are even less trustworthy when allowed to roam freely. Because of their intelligence and nimble forelimbs, even inexperienced raccoons are easily capable of unscrewing jars, uncorking bottles and opening door latches, with more experienced raccoons having been recorded to open door knobs. Mature raccoons often show aggressive natural behaviors such as biting during the mating season.

The most identifying feature of the raccoon is the area of black fur around the eyes, which contrasts sharply with the surrounding white face coloring. This looks like a "bandit's mask" and has enhanced the raccoon's reputation for mischief. According to PBS Nature, the black mask around a raccoon's eyes helps deflect glare and helps with night vision.

The most important sense for the raccoon is its sense of touch. Raccoons have five toes on their front paws that act much like human hands, without the opposable thumbs. These "hyper sensitive" front paws are protected by a thin horny layer that becomes pliable when wet. The five digits of the paws have no webbing between them, which is unusual for a carnivoran.

Dousing is one aspect of raccoon behavior that is so well known that it gives the animal part of its scientific name, *Procyon lotor*; "lotor" is neo-Latin for "washer". In the wild, raccoons often dabble for underwater food near the shore-line. They often pick up the food item with their front paws to examine it and rub the item, sometimes to remove unwanted parts. This gives the appearance of the raccoon "washing" the food. However, the behavior observed in captive raccoons in which they carry their food to water to "wash" or douse it before eating has not been observed in the wild. It is believed that the "washing" behavior in captive raccoon is something they have retained from when they foraged at shores for aquatic foods. Cleaning dirty food does not seem to be a reason for "washing".

Although captive raccoons have been known to live over 20 years, their life expectancy in the wild is only 2 to 3 years. In many areas, hunting and vehicular injury are the two most common causes of death. The most important natural predators of the raccoon are bobcats, coyotes, and great horned owls.

Raccoons depend on vertical structures to climb when they feel threatened. A can raccoon rotate its hind feet so they are pointing backward. This ability enables it to climb down a tree headfirst, a most unusual ability for a mammal of its size. Raccoons can run up to 15 mph and can fall 35 to 40 feet without injury.

Hollows in old oaks or other trees and rock crevices are preferred by raccoons as sleeping, winter and litter dens. Raccoons sometimes use burrows dug by other animals.

Raccoons bear their young known as "kits", in the spring, after a gestation period of about 65 days. The average litter size is two to five young, and varies widely with habitat. It is not unusual for only half of the young born in one year to survive a full year. Males have no part in raising young. The kits are blind and deaf at birth, but their mask is already visible against their light fur. They begin to hear and open their eyes for the first time around 18 to 23 days. Once the kits weigh about 2 lb, they begin to explore outside the den, consuming solid food for the first time after six to nine weeks. They are usually weaned by 16 weeks. In the fall, after their mother has shown them dens and feeding grounds, the juvenile group splits up. While many females will stay close to the home range of their mother, males can sometimes move more than 12 miles away.

As omnivores, raccoons eat both vegetation and meat. Its diet consists of about 40% invertebrates, 33% plant material and 27% vertebrates. Since its diet consists of such a variety of different foods, some scientist believe that the raccoon "may well be one of the world's most omnivorous animals". They eat a variety of wild fruits and nuts, like persimmons, berries, wild grapes, acorns, and pecans. When it comes to meat, some of the raccoon's favorite animal treats are frogs, fish, crayfish, insects, rodents and bird eggs. Raccoons are virulent predators of eggs and hatchlings in both birds and reptile nests, to such a degree that, for threatened prey species, raccoons may need to be removed from the area or nests may need to be relocated to mitigate the effect of their predations (i.e. in the case of some globally threatened turtles). In the northern parts of their range, raccoons go into a winter rest, reducing their activity drastically as long as a permanent snow cover makes searching for food impossible. When food is scarce, raccoons aren't above scavenging human trash or eating roadkill. Though usually nocturnal, the raccoon is sometimes active in daylight to take advantage of available food sources. Wildlife experts caution against feeding wild animals. Doing so causes them to become increasingly obtrusive and dependent on humans as a food source. Raccoons that eat cat food can become obese and suffer from gout.

The raccoon appears in Native American art and mythology across a wide geographic range. For the indigenous peoples of the Americas, the raccoon is the subject of folk tales. Stories such as "How raccoons catch so many crayfish" centered on its skills at foraging. In other tales, the raccoon played the role of the trickster which outsmarts other animals, like coyotes and wolves. Other tribes believe the raccoon has natural spirit powers, since its mask resembled the facial paintings, two-fingered swashes of black and white, used during rituals to connect to spirit beings. While primarily hunted for their fur, to be used for clothing and decoration, raccoons were also a source of food for Native Americans and early American settlers. The famous Sioux leader Spotted Tail took his name from a raccoon skin hat with the tail attached he acquired from a fur trader.

The fur of raccoons is still used for clothing, especially for coats and coonskin caps. At present, it is the material used for the inaccurately named "sealskin" cap worn by the Royal Fusiliers of Great Britain. Since the late 18th century, various types of scent hounds, called "coonhounds", which are able to tree animals have been bred in the United States. In the 19th century, when coonskins occasionally even served as means of payment, several thousand raccoons were killed each year in the United States. This number rose quickly when automobile coats became popular after the turn of the 20th century. In the 1920s, wearing a raccoon coat was regarded as status symbol among college students. Attempts to breed raccoons in fur farms in the 1920s and 1930s in North America and Europe turned out not to be profitable, and farming was abandoned after prices for long-haired pelts dropped in the 1940s. Although raccoons had become rare in the 1930s, at least 388,000 were killed during the hunting season of 1934/35. After persistent population increases began in the 1940s, the seasonal coon hunting harvest reached about one million animals in 1946/47 and two million in 1962/63. The broadcast of three television episodes about the frontiersman Davy Crockett and the film *Davy Crockett, King of the Wild Frontier* in 1954 and 1955 led to a high demand for coonskin caps in the United States. The seasonal hunt reached an all-time high with 5.2 million animals in 1976/77 and ranged between 3.2 and 4.7 million for most of the 1980s. In 1982, the average pelt price was \$20. As of 1987, the raccoon was identified as the most important wild furbearer in North America in terms of revenue. In the first half of the 1990s, the seasonal hunt dropped to 0.9 from 1.9 million due to decreasing pelt prices.

The Cajun French word for raccoon is *Chaouis*, pronounced *shah wee*. The people would say '*Ein chaoui, c'est cette 'tite bête qui lave ses écrevisses avant de les manger.*' Translated to English is '*A raccoon is that little animal that washes its crawfish before eating them.*' *Chaouis* is actually only a Cajun French word. It comes from the Choctaw language. The Standard French word for a raccoon is *raton laveur*.

I'd like to thank Celina Feith and Kim Hollier Broussard for the sharing their inspiring pictures of a familiar raccoon taken at Palmetto Island State Park.