

Life on Two Rivers

By ELLEN COCHRANE

Some of the great animal mysteries of the world will never be solved, such as how can my dog breathe under the blankets, or why are cats engineered to be heat seeking creatures. While this story may not reveal deep, dark secrets of nature, it will bring you closer to the fur, feathers and flora outside your window in our beautiful, riparian Sacramento neighborhoods. There is so much drama in the yard.

Raccoons

We got the call in Bodega Bay. "She's okay, but she's been attacked by raccoons."

Two hours later an embarrassed dog with a shaved butt greeted me at the door. She had stitches and contusions and a permanent fear of the masked banditos that own the night.

The insouciant punks had swum in our pool, picked the fruit and spied through the dog door, but attacking Buttercup was a bridge too far. My first inclination after the assault was to capture the criminal and relocate it miles

up the American River. Common sense prevailed. We live with hundreds of raccoons in this two-river city, and most of them live in our river neighborhoods. Relocation is not a solution. (Relocated wildlife usually ends up dying in unfamiliar territory.) Destroying the creature was out of the question.

My neighbors on NextDoor regaled me with stories about these hooligans: they've broken up raccoon brawls with water hoses, chased them out of houses, the chimneys, garages and the undercarriage of a truck.

If I was going to live with them, I needed to get smart. They certainly are, so I studied up.

In Germany they call them washing bears. In France—little washing rat. Our word raccoon comes from Algonquin—aroughcounne, meaning "he who scratches with his hand."

I found out that these intelligent nocturnal mammals have extremely sensitive front paws that can manipulate latches, locks, bird feeders and door handles. They don't really wash their food, but will roll and manipulate it on dry land and in water, using sense of touch to gather information. With no opposable thumbs they can't grab and lift but they use both hands together to explore and grasp. The paw uses a special set of "whiskers" called the vibrissae. These specialized hairs extend slightly beyond



(above left) This raccoon beat a hasty retreat down 43rd Street after a dust up a labrador.



(above right) War wounds after a backyard encounter.

Photos by Ellen Cochran

the front claws and transmit information much like the whiskers on cats.

They are a new world animal found almost everywhere in North America, including our attics, under porches and sheds. So avoiding human/raccoon conflict can be a challenge.

Raccoons are not a form of wild dog or cat; in fact their closest relatives are ring-tails and coatis (a Central-South American animal). One thing is certain—they are survivors. Transplanted to Asia and Europe as novelties and pets, escaped raccoons now claim large territories on these continents.

Encroachment on territory forces raccoons to use the sewers as underground highways and human structures as homes. Large predators like black bear used to keep raccoons in check, but that's not the case now. The

raccoon's number one predator is now man.

Early spring days are the time when momma raccoons will have litters. We will also see more raccoons out and about at night during the warmer months because while they don't hibernate, they decrease activity in the winter in a type of dormancy called "daily torpor."

In the wild their food is about 40 percent invertebrates, 33 percent plant foods, and 27 percent vertebrates. That can translate to about 40 percent cat food, 33 percent fruit trees, and 27 percent garbage in the city.

After the dog was attacked I realized that my dilapidated backyard shed was home to a brood. We decided to tear it down. Picking up the fruit also helped, and we never leave out any kind of animal food. The pool remains

a huge draw. I've come out in the morning to find the skimmer lid pried off, basket out and all the debris scattered. I also hear them in the wee hours of summer mornings, chirping merrily around the pool, and I've seen two in at a time paddling around.

Buttercup will not go out into the back yard after sunset without an escort. It's just as well. She's a 10-pound Chihuahua mix, not much of a fighter and no match for the raccoons. She will sit on the couch and growl out the window, letting me know they are there.

Many great websites will help you deal with raccoons safely and humanly. We survived and live in a kind of truce. Although my neighbors probably wonder why I run into the back yard every night with the dog clapping and hooting, "you get outta here."

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