

Fall  
1988

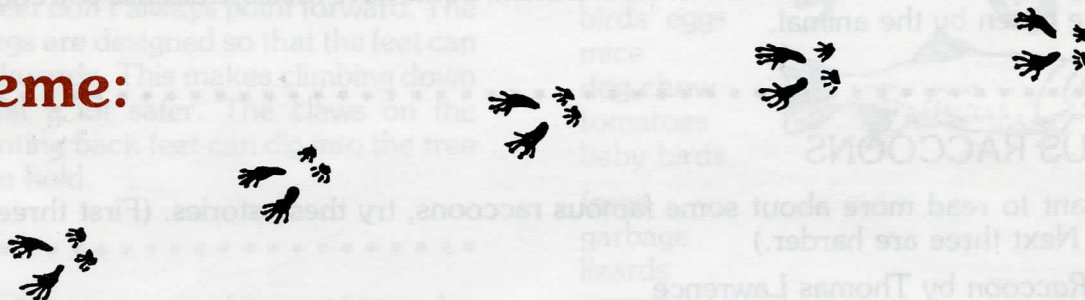


# Nature Detectives

Who's been here? What were they doing and why were they doing it? When did it happen? Nature detectives try to answer questions like these by looking for clues and evidence of the activities of creatures in the outdoors.

Have you ever wondered about teeth marks on the trunk of a tree, or strange footprints in the snow or mud? If you have, then you are already a nature detective.

Theme:



## Raccoon Round-up

What do you have in common with that masked animal the raccoon? You are both mammals. Mammals are the only animals that nurse their young with milk produced by the mother. They are the only animals with hair or fur. People have a light covering of hair, but raccoons have a thick coat of fur. Why do raccoons need thick fur? Raccoons also have whiskers—long, sensitive hairs on both sides of their noses that help them feel their way in the dark or in and out of small places. Our whiskers aren't that specialized!

There are other characteristics which are shared by mammals: mammals have backbones and brains; they give birth to live young; they are warm-blooded, which means their body temperatures stay about the same even when the temperature around them changes; and they have different types of teeth, depending on what they eat. People and raccoons are omnivores, animals that eat plants and other animals. We both have four kinds of teeth: canines, incisors, molars, and premolars. Do you know what these different teeth are used for? There are other ways in which you're similar to a raccoon, and many ways in which you're different. Read on and find out!





## CITY COONS

Raccoons have learned to survive many changes in this country--the destruction of many forests, the spread of cities, and the pollution of numerous rivers and streams. For the raccoon, these changes mean the loss of food and shelter. But the coon is adaptable! If the hollow tree where he makes his home is chopped down, a raccoon may move into a nice round sewer pipe, or into a corner of your warm attic! If the stream where he catches fish and frogs for dinner is polluted by a factory, he eats fruits and nuts, insects and birds' eggs, even the smelly contents of your garbage can! Yes, the coon has learned to live in the city. So don't be surprised if you see one ambling down the alley behind your house, or stealing apples from your tree!



Even though coons are cute, never touch or feed them. Some have rabies, a disease you could catch if you were bitten by the animal.

## \* \* \* \* \* FAMOUS RACCOONS \* \* \* \* \*

\* If you want to read more about some famous raccoons, try these stories. (First three are easy reading. Next three are harder.)

- \* *Robber Raccoon* by Thomas Lawrence
- \* *But Not Stanleigh and Stanleigh's Wrong-Side-Out Day* by Barbara Steiner
- \* *Rascal* by Sterling North
- \* *Frosty, A Raccoon to Remember* by Harriet E. Weaver
- \* *The Year of the Raccoon* by Lee Kingham

## FAMILY LIFE

Raccoon cubs are born in litters of three to seven cubs in a hole in a tree. Newborn cubs are only four inches (10 cm) long and they weigh as much as a Snicker's candy bar. Cubs' masks and tail rings show at two weeks, but their eyes do not open until the fourth week. At first, bird-like twittering noises come from the den, but after several weeks the cubs begin to churr and growl. For the first month, the mother rarely travels more than half-a-mile from the den to feed. The cubs huddle together in the den and climb to the den entrance to look out. Sometimes they fall out, but they can fall 20 feet (6 m) without being injured. The mother will pick the cubs up by the scruff of the neck and carry them back up the tree. At six to nine weeks the mother moves the young out of the tree to a den on the ground. After ten weeks, the young will travel with their mother at night in search of food. The cubs learn by observing their mother; cubs also learn through play. Yet, when the cubs step too far out of line mother raccoon will spank them with her paw. By the 16th week, the young begin to roam on their own as they prepare to disperse, or leave home.





## COON TALES

The name **raccoon** comes from an Algonquin Indian word **arakunem** (or **arakun**), which means 'He who scratches with his hands'.

People have thumbs that work opposite fingers to pick up objects and handle them skillfully.

Coons don't have thumbs like this. Their two outside fingers work across the middle three fingers. Yet they are clever at handling objects and can open all kinds of fasteners. They use their sensitive fingers to catch food in the water by feel.

The palms of their hands and the soles of their feet are not hairy. This makes their hands and feet sensitive exploring tools.

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Coons' back feet don't always point forward. The bones in the legs are designed so that the feet can also point backwards. This makes climbing down trees head first a lot safer. The claws on the backward-pointing back feet can dig into the tree bark for a firm hold.

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Coons have tails with rings and faces with masks. Shades of light and dark make the tail seem less solid. In the dead of night a hunting coon glides along the ground and blends into the shadows.

The bandit mask may be a way that coons recognize other coons. It may help vision by stopping glare. A mirror cell layer at the back of the eye, called the tapetum, helps night vision too, by bouncing light past the eye nerves twice.



Question: Which of these foods will coons eat?

crayfish  
turtle eggs  
tadpoles  
berries

acorns  
apples  
snakes  
bones

nuts  
fish  
berries  
worms

mushrooms  
sweet corn  
grasshoppers  
birds' eggs

mice  
dog chow  
tomatoes  
baby birds

frogs  
garbage  
lizards  
grapes

Answer: Coons are OMNIVOROUS. They eat all those foods though they don't seem to like tomatoes very much!

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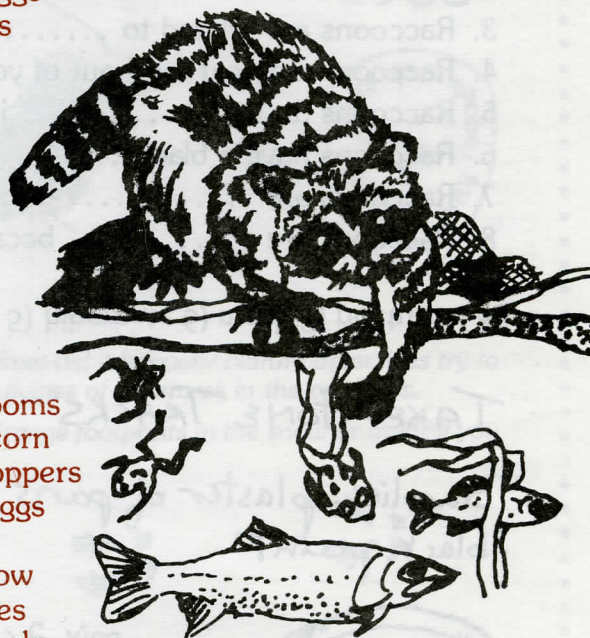
Some people think coons wash their food because they are fussy, clean animals. Some people think coons wet their food because they don't have enough saliva (spit) to help digest and swallow the food, or because their throats are narrow and wet food slides down more easily.

Do coons wash their food?

Although coons do dunk food if there is water handy, it isn't really washing. Coons will eat food that is dirty, and dunk food that is clean! If there is no water near, coons will still gobble down a dry and dirty meal. They have plenty of saliva to digest the food.

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Baby raccoons crawl in circles when they first begin to move about in the den. That's a good safety feature for babies born in high places. They don't crawl straight over a steep edge.





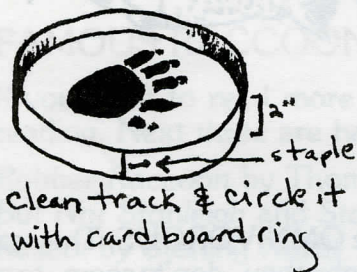
## RACCOON WORD SCRAMBLE

1. A raccoon is a kind of ..... (ammlam)
2. A raccoon eats ..... from streams. (yfhraics)
3. Raccoons are related to ..... (snpdad)
4. Raccoons may eat food out of your ..... (agbraeg ncsa)
5. Raccoons do not ..... in the winter. (nbraiethe)
6. Raccoons have a black ..... over their eyes. (smka)
7. Raccoons are ..... because they come out at night. (trnoculan)
8. Raccoons are ..... because they eat a wide variety of foods. (nvoimerso)

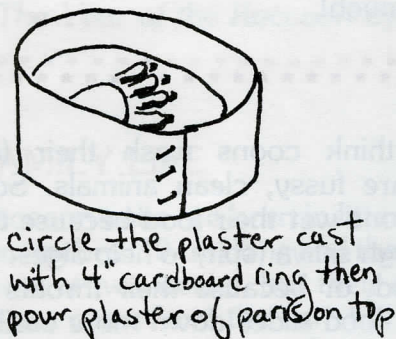
Answers: 1) mammal 2) crayfish 3) pandas 4) garbage cans 5) hibernate 6) mask 7) nocturnal 8) omnivores

## TAKE-HOME TRACKS

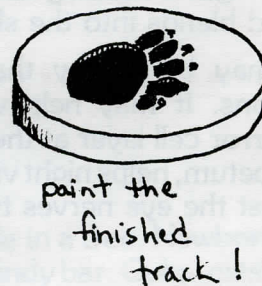
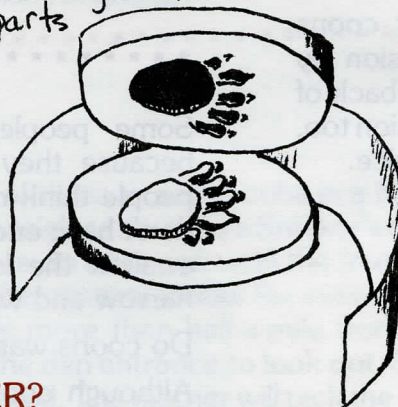
Supplies: plaster of paris, cardboard strips (2" & 4" wide), vaseline, black paint



mix 2 cups plaster of paris with 1 cup water and pour into ring



after 2 hours remove the ring & separate the parts



## WHAT ABOUT WINTER?

Raccoons do not hibernate like bears do in the winter. Yet, during very cold weather raccoons will retreat to their dens and sleep for one to fourteen days. They live on stored body fat. When awake, they will forage for food. For more warmth, a raccoon's fur grows thicker. Also, a mother and her raccoon cubs will often den in a tree hole together at night to keep each other warm. By the time winter is over raccoons have lost a lot of weight, and they are ready for spring and more food!

**NATURE DETECTIVES:** Place Walden Ponds. Saturday, October 22. Explore the world of raccoons. This mostly indoor program of games and projects will include making raccoon masks and learning about very special feet and fingers. See "Discover Nature Calendar" for details.