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## Humans are the main predators of raccoons.

Each year in North America, approximately three million raccoons are killed for their pelts and thousands more are killed on our roads and

fishers and great horned owls.

Despite these dangers, the raccoon population continues to thrive in nearly all areas of Canada.

Raccoons in Ontario are now starting to face

Other natural predators of raccoons are bobcats, coyotes, wolves, fox, domestic dogs, another threat — rabies. This deadly disease can be transmitted between raccoons and other infected animals. There are currently several programs in place to vaccinate raccoons against this disease. Bait that contains the vaccine is being dispersed throughout eastern Ontario, and in some areas, individual raccoons are being trapped, inoculated and released. So far there are relatively few cases of raccoons in Ontario contracting rabies, and hopefully, with these vaccine programs, we can prevent any additional animals from becoming infected.



## Are you a good raccoon detective? Try this at home.

Check out the following **Rascally Raccoon Resource** from the FON: *Introducing Mammals, Teaching Guide*

And some cool raccoon-friendly Web sites:

<http://www.cws-scf.ec.gc.ca>

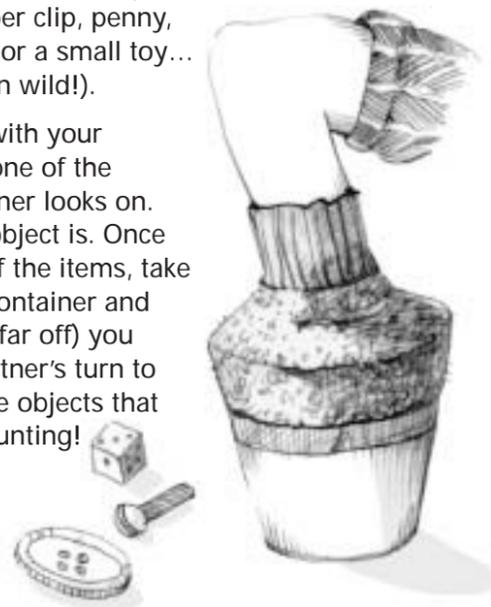
<http://www.bear-tracker.com/coon.html>

<http://www.schoolnet.ca/vp-pv/mammals/e/list9.html>

<http://www.bcadventure.com>

See if you can tell the difference between 10 different items by only touching them. Get a friend to help you be a raccoon detective.

- Each of you will need a large, empty yogurt container, an old sock and some masking tape.
- Cut the foot part off the sock and stretch the remaining sock tube over the open end of the container. Attach it with masking tape so the cuff hangs over the top of the container.
- Place at least 10 different small objects in the bottom of the yogurt container (a paper clip, penny, cork, bottle cap, acorn, or a small toy... let your imagination run wild!).
- Now trade containers with your partner and "fish" for one of the objects while your partner looks on. Try to guess what the object is. Once you have guessed all of the items, take the objects out of the container and see how close (or how far off) you were. Now it's your partner's turn to "fish for" and guess the objects that you collected. Happy hunting!



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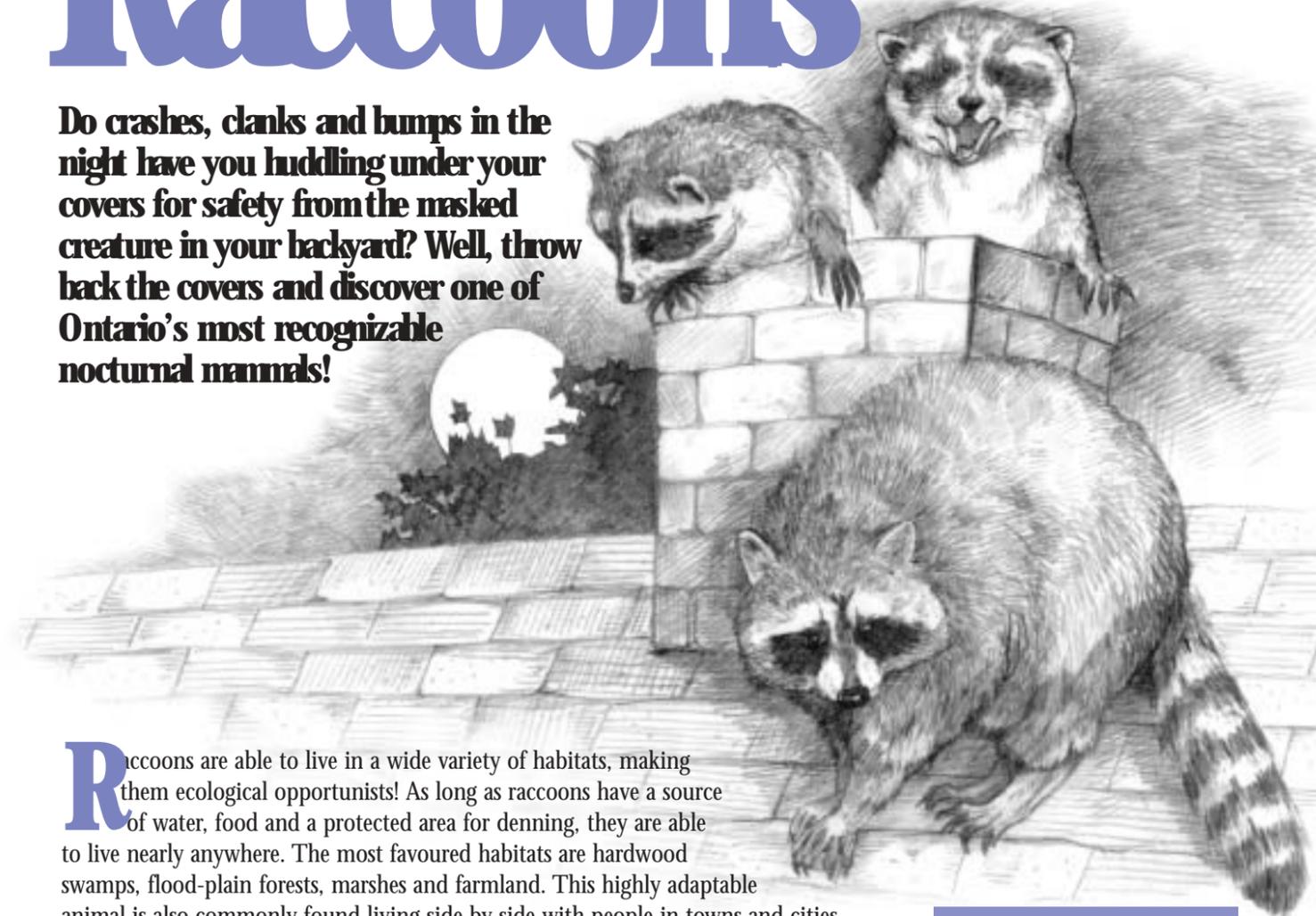
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# Masked Marauding Mammals Raccoons

Do crashes, clanks and bumps in the night have you huddling under your covers for safety from the masked creature in your backyard? Well, throw back the covers and discover one of Ontario's most recognizable nocturnal mammals!



Raccoons are able to live in a wide variety of habitats, making them ecological opportunists! As long as raccoons have a source of water, food and a protected area for denning, they are able to live nearly anywhere. The most favoured habitats are hardwood swamps, flood-plain forests, marshes and farmland. This highly adaptable animal is also commonly found living side by side with people in towns and cities.

Most raccoons have a brownish-black body with lighter fur on their bellies. These medium-sized mammals have a ringed tail with between five and 10 alternating black and brown rings...but it is not their tails that make these mammals one of the most easily identified in Ontario.

Who was that masked man...or why does a raccoon have a mask? No one really knows for sure why raccoons have masks, but this feature certainly makes them one of the most distinctive mammals in Canada. One possible reason for the mask is to help them identify friends and relatives. It seems as if each mask is slightly different, so they can be used almost the way fingerprints are to identify people. Another possible reason for the mask is to help improve their night vision. Professional football and baseball players often wear black charcoal or makeup under their eyes to help reduce the glare from the sun. The raccoon's black mask surrounding its eyes might help to reduce the glare of the moon off the water when the raccoon hunts for its prey.

Raccoons are found in every province of Canada except for Newfoundland and Labrador. As people continue to clear more and more forests for agricultural crops and towns, the habitat of these unique animals has increased farther to the north.



Professional athletes aren't the only ones with something in common with the mischievous raccoon.

Stretch your fingers out as wide as you can.

Now compare your hand to the front paw of a raccoon.

Notice any similarities?

**Did you know...**The word "raccoon" comes from the Algonquin word "arakum" meaning "he scratches with his hand."

# Wash your supper before eating..

How many times have you heard, "wash your hands before supper"? But have you ever heard, "wash your supper before eating"? Many people will say that a raccoon's most distinctive feature, other than its masked eyes, is that it washes its food before eating it. Well, even though many sources still report this behaviour, it has been found that although these are highly creative animals, they are not necessarily overly hygienic. Raccoons do not, in fact, wash their food in water before eating it. Since a large portion of this animal's diet is made up of crayfish, tadpoles and other aquatic creatures, the raccoon is simply

hunting for a tasty snack in the water with its front paws. People have misinterpreted this for washing their food. Also, raccoons have very sensitive hands and fingers and will anxiously rub items that are unique in texture or exciting to eat— and boy, do they love crayfish!

Maybe crayfish isn't your idea of a tasty after-school snack, but think of rubbing your hands in excitement at the thought of a Big Mac or an ice cream cone — get the idea?

Raccoons will happily chomp on the melons, tomatoes or earthworms in your garden without taking a trip to the bird bath for a rinse, they are grateful for a meal, dirty or not.

crayfish

## A raccoon will eat just about anything

Raccoons belong to the order of mammals called Carnivora or carnivores. These masked creatures are primarily meat eaters but will also sometimes eat grains, nuts, berries or grasses in small amounts. Like their large relative the bear, raccoons are said to be omnivores because they eat such a large amount of plant material as well as meat. A raccoon is an opportunistic feeder and will eat just about anything that it comes across. Although its favourites are corn, crayfish, fruits and nuts, a raccoon will also eat muskrats, squirrels, rabbits, eggs, clams, fish, turtles, insects, earthworms, snails and vegetables out of your garden.

In the summer, the water level in small pools and creeks drops, exposing a smor-

gasbord of food. In areas of low water, you can often find a raccoon wading with its paws submerged. The raccoon isn't going for a refreshing drip in the cool water; he is hunting for crayfish, tadpoles, small fish or amphibians.

Despite the wide variety of wild food this omnivore will eat, the raccoon has found plenty of yummy food in unsealed garbage containers, vegetable gardens, orchards and farmlands — easy meals with no hunting required! Unfortunately, this uninvited dinner guest is not welcome by those who have had to clean up after a midnight feast.

This inquisitive and intelligent animal is known for getting itself in trouble around both agricultural areas and in cities. In rural areas, a family of raccoons can cause extensive damage to corn crops, orchards, melon patches and poultry farms. In towns and cities, damage to roofs, gardens and lawns have all been blamed on the handiwork of raccoons. Many people in urban areas have their first encounter with a raccoon when it is rummaging through their garbage can in search of tasty tidbits. A raccoon's agile fingers and hands allow it to open latches, untie knots and open even "raccoon proof" garbage cans.

Raccoons are nocturnal, which means that they are most active during the night.

Although they wake up near dusk, they wait until the cover of darkness to leave their well-hidden den. On a typical night, raccoons will be away from their den for up to 13 hours, but when food is scarce and they must travel farther for a bite to eat, they might be out until after sunrise. Raccoons will usually return to their best food sources, so if your garbage can has been raided one night, you can almost guarantee a repeat performance.

## In the north, during the long cold winters there is little food available, even for the adaptable raccoon.

In these areas, raccoons eat large amounts of food in the fall to help develop a thick layer of fat. The raccoons can live off of these fat reserves when food is not available. Its warm, thick fur coat also helps keep the chill of winter away and acts as an insulator in the cold winter months. Before Old Man Winter covers the ground with a blanket of snow, raccoons will look for a suitable den for overwintering. A hollow tree, stump, log, cave, vacant fox burrow, barn, attic, garage or sewer — any shelter near open water — can act as a protected den for the winter. Unlike other mammals such as groundhogs, raccoons do not actually hibernate; they simply become less active. Sometimes on warmer winter days you might see a raccoon digging in the thin layer of snow under your backyard bird feeder for a mid-winter snack of nutritious sunflower seeds and nuts, but usually they stay snugly curled up in an old tree or burrow.

After winter has loosened its icy grip on the fields and forests, spring is the season for new beginnings and new life. Raccoons mate in late February or March. About two months later, tiny, helpless baby raccoons are born with between two and six brothers and sisters. The babies are born without teeth, their eyes are closed and they weigh only 75 grams (just a little heavier than a large chocolate bar!). The mother raccoon will fearlessly defend her babies from predators, so give a mother and babies plenty of room if you come across them in your yard or garden. The babies stay with their protective mother for the first few months while they learn how to find food. By the fall the babies are large and strong enough to fend for themselves, and they begin to show their independence by venturing out into the wilderness alone.

A hollow tree, stump or log can act as a protected den for the winter.

