



MAKE HABITAT A HABIT

CUTE, FUZZY AND BEST LEFT ALONE

By Barbara Caswell



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Raccoons are a true North American native, and have only spread to Europe through the travels of civilization. Quite a few of the animals that live in our backyards were named by Indians who spent many, many hours observing their behavior back in the days when people spent most of their time outdoors. The raccoon's name derives from Indian words for "he scratches with the hands," and the German name translates to "Washbears." Perfect descriptions, although the raccoon's relationship to bears is quite distant.

When learning to climb, baby raccoons dangle from their strong front arms for long periods, and then arduously pull themselves back up. When still kitten-sized, they learn to sleep all day in perfect comfort, 50 feet off the ground in tall trees.

Young raccoons purr and squeak excitedly as they first attempt climbing lower branches. They get just a little ways off the ground and start looking worriedly downward, quickly getting stuck just like kittens do, afraid to head down and afraid to go higher. But unlike kittens, baby raccoons have incredible upper body strength. Novice wildlife workers are warned not to get close to a raccoon enclosure when the animals are awake and reaching through the wire, because if they get a grip on clothing or hair they can be tenacious.

Testing indicates that a raccoon can push, lift, pull or otherwise manipulate a perfect series of 24 rod and pin locks to open a puzzle box with bait inside. Not only that, but a raccoon who learns a routine such as this can repeat it a year later.

Knowledge like this can be turned to your advantage when you are learning to live with wild raccoons who come into your garden at night. Wildlife rescues advise homeowners not to trap and relocate raccoons, unless there is a true rogue animal involved. You could remove the raccoons in your area, but new ones will simply move in and replace the previous population. However, if you use a hot wire around a favorite planting bed, even



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It is thought that the raccoon's affinity for feeling things under water is not truly an effort to wash food, but that moisture increases the sensitivity of their paws so that they can find things more efficiently in the mud. Many wildlife workers notice that a raccoon often gazes away vacantly while feeling in the mud, perhaps as we might do to block out distractions while concentrating.



This little guy is as smart as he looks! In other states, where keeping a raccoon as a pet is legal, people have come home to find all their faucets turned on full blast, cupboards open with cans pulled out all over the kitchen floor, and the electric can opener running. But extreme intelligence and dexterity in animals does not qualify them as good pets!

for a short time, the intelligent raccoon is capable of remembering to avoid these spots, and can warn their families also, so you wind up with a “trained” group.

Raccoons are so irresistibly attracted to water that we can direct their activity just by turning faucets on and off to lure them in certain directions.

Any time you decide to fight nature, you’ve created a full-time job for yourself. Easiest of all is to stick to native plants if you live near a wildlife area. Raccoons are unable to resist water, so if you install a pond, you will certainly get nighttime visitors of many kinds, and of course that means that if you keep a dog, he should get into the habit of staying in after dark to avoid conflicts. Generally, cats and raccoons observe each other with very little interaction.



If you enjoy sightings of these fascinating animals, you should keep recirculating and ponding water with some muddy areas for worm hunting. Conversely, to discourage raccoons, you should feed pets indoors, keep dogs in at night, and dry up soggy spots in the garden. Wild raccoons will quickly respond to a hot wire marking spots from which you want to keep them.

Our wildlife center director once observed a raccoon carefully twisting the cap off a tube of toothpaste.

Photos are a good idea; contact is not. Even if you love wild animals, feeding them leads to overpopulation and pest behavior that results in the animal’s eventual death, so let them find their own food.

Barbara Caswell, the owner of *Designs of the Times*, is the Sonoma County home and garden designer who created Haverfield Park. Her home is a nostalgic country estate with a showcase quality house in a private natural setting.

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