

## RACCOONS

It seems Cache County has an abundance of mischievous raccoons. This distinctively marked omnivore, with a prominent black “mask” over the eyes and a heavily furred, ringed tail, has become a significant nuisance in the valley.

Raccoons are nocturnal and eat both plant and animal foods. They tend to be territorial and “hole up” in dens, brush, haystacks or buildings and become inactive during severe winter weather. They breed in late winter to early spring and have a gestation period of approximately 60 days. Only one litter of young is raised each year with an average litter size of three to five. Young raccoons are weaned sometime between two and four months of age. Family groups of raccoons usually stay together for the first year and then the young begin to separate and become independent. They may live as long as 12 years, but that is extremely rare.

Raccoons can cause considerable damage to garden crops, particularly sweet corn and watermelon. Raccoon damage to sweet corn is usually characterized by partially eaten ears with the husks pulled back and broken stalks. Raccoons damage watermelon by digging a small hole in the melon, then raking out the contents with a front paw. They can also cause damage to houses and outbuildings when they attempt to gain entrance to attics or chimneys. In some cases, raccoons may tear off shingles or fascia boards in order to gain access to an attic or wall space.

Poultry and ground-nesting birds and waterfowl are also at risk when raccoons are around. Young poultry in pens or cages may be killed or injured by raccoons reaching through the wire and attempting to pull the birds back through the mesh. If allowed into a poultry coop, raccoons leave distinctive signs by biting off the chicken heads and leaving them some distance from the body. The crop and breast may be torn and chewed, the entrails sometimes eaten, and bits of flesh left near water. Raccoons also like to eat eggs.

Damage to sweet corn or watermelon can most effectively be stopped by excluding raccoons with a single or double hot-wire arrangement. Two wires are recommended, but one wire 6 inches above the ground may be sufficient. The fence can be activated at dusk and turned off after daybreak. Electric fence chargers are available at farm supply dealers. Electric fences should be used with care, and appropriate caution signs should be installed.

Wrapping filament tape around ripening ears of corn is another effective method for reducing damage. When using tape, it is important to apply the type with glass-yarn filaments embedded within so the raccoons cannot easily tear through the tape. Taping is more labor intensive than fencing, but may be more practical for small backyard gardens. Several techniques have been attempted to frighten raccoons, but none have proven to be effective over long periods of time.

Raccoon access to house rooftops can be limited by removing overhanging branches. A chimney cap of sheet metal and heavy screen should also be securely attached to the top of chimneys. These devices are available commercially. Poultry damage can generally be prevented by excluding raccoons with tightly covered doors and windows on buildings or mesh-wire fences with an overhang surrounding poultry yards. There are no practical means of modifying habitat

to reduce raccoon depredations other than removing obvious sources of food or shelter which may be attractive to the rascals.

Raccoons are relatively easy to catch in traps, but it takes a sturdy trap to hold one. They typically weigh 10 to 30 pounds, and sometimes more than that. For homeowners with pets, a live or cage-type trap is usually the preferred alternative. A live animal trap is available at the Extension office and can be checked out for short periods of time. Canned fish-flavored cat food, sardines, fish or chicken are commonly used baits. Twinkies also work extremely well, especially with a small amount of liquid vanilla added. Place a pile of bait behind the treadle and scatter a few small bits outside the opening of the trap and just inside the entrance.

Although raccoon damage and nuisance problems can be locally severe, widespread raccoon control programs are hard to justify.