

Tows and Tails Sanctuary



"Crystal is a beloved resident of Tows and Tails Sanctuary, a licensed rescue for wildlife with disabilities. She has a big impact on everyone she meets with her gentle spirit and love for life. At a very young age, Crystal became sick and eventually lost the use of her legs. Though paralyzed, Crystal doesn't let that slow her down — she has a big personality and an even bigger heart. As the sanctuary's educational ambassador, Crystal plays an important role in teaching the community about raccoons and the vital place they hold in our ecosystem. Her story not only helps people learn to respect and understand wildlife but also shows how compassion and care can transform lives. Sweet, curious, and full of character, Crystal brings joy to all who meet her and continues to inspire love and acceptance to the world" Kristen Littles, Founder and Director, Tows and Tails Sanctuary.

Raccoons unmasked

Raccoons, native to North America, exhibit 15 subspecies, each resulting from environmental and dietary variations. The body weight of adult raccoons exhibits significant variability depending on habitat, making them one of the most variably sized mammals. In northern regions, raccoons tend to be larger, particularly during the fall when they accumulate fat reserves for winter. In contrast, southern raccoons found in Florida and Cozumel are the smallest, weighing between 4 and 6 pounds and characterized by lighter coloration. Fur colors exhibit a range of reds and grays, with males typically being 15 to 20% heavier than females. At the onset of winter, raccoons can accumulate twice their spring weight due to fat storage.

All raccoons possess ringed tails and distinctive black mask-like markings on their faces. These dark patterns around the eyes likely serve as a protective mechanism against glare. As a result of escapes and introductions in the mid-20th century, raccoons have now been introduced to central Europe, the Caucasus, and Japan. They are classified as invasive alien species within the European Union.

Tactile Tricksters: How Raccoons Feel Their Way to a Feast

Raccoons are renowned for their omnivorous nature, with a diet comprising approximately 40% invertebrates, 33% plant matter, and 27% vertebrates. Notably, certain subspecies, such as the raccoon found on St. Simons Islands, have evolved specialized teeth that enable them to efficiently crush crab shells, which constitute their primary food source. Their dexterity is further enhanced by their ability to use their front paws to open doors and untie knots, earning them the reputation of mischievous creatures. In addition to their



dexterity, raccoons possess an exceptional sense of touch. They possess four to five times more sensory cells in their paws compared to most mammals, and approximately 75% of the brain region responsible for processing sensory input is dedicated to touch. Observing photographs of raccoons washing their food, it becomes evident that they engage

in this behavior regardless of the availability of water. This dousing serves as a means of enhancing their sense of touch, thereby gathering more sensory data about the food item in their paws.

Handy Creatures: Opposable Thumbs Across the Animal Kingdom

Although raccoon front paws resemble human hands, they lack opposable thumbs. Opposable thumbs are digits that can be positioned opposite the other fingers on the same hand, enabling precise grip and fine motor skills. Besides humans, gorillas, chimpanzees, bonobos, orangutans, monkeys, and certain lemurs and lorises possess opposable thumbs. Notably, non-primates such as koalas, which have two opposable thumbs on each paw, enhance their grip on branches. The waxy monkey tree frog, endemic to South America, utilizes its opposable thumbs for climbing rather than hopping. Opossums, related to koalas, have evolved opposable thumbs on their hind feet. Chameleons, with five toes on each foot, have two or three opposable toes. Slow lorises, found in Southeast Asia and the only venomous primate, also possess opposable thumbs.



From Powhatan Roots to Political Symbol: The Raccoon's Tale

The English word “raccoon” originated from the Powhatan Native American language, where it was translated as “animal that scratches with its hands.” This term was recorded by John Smith on a list of Powhatan words as “roughcun.” In Spanish, the raccoon is known as “mapache,” which is derived from the Aztec language and means “the one who takes everything in its hands.” A shortened colloquial form of “raccoon,” “coon,” is employed in words such as “coonskin” to describe clothing crafted from the hides and trappers, often referred to as “old coons.” During the 1830s, the Whig Party adopted the raccoon as an emblem, leading their political opponents to label them as “coons.” This term soon became an ethnic slur and remains offensive to this day. Dogs that hunt raccoons are commonly referred to as “coonhounds” or “coon dogs.”

More Fear Than Fact: The Real Rabies Risk from Raccoons

Raccoons, bats, skunks, red foxes, and gray foxes are the primary carriers of rabies. However, there is minimal concern, as only one person in the United States has ever succumbed to the strain of rabies carried by raccoons, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). Between 2009 and 2019, there were only 25 cases of rabies in humans, and only two were associated with raccoons. Notably, raccoons can frequently carry rabies without exhibiting any outward symptoms. Rabies is a virus that targets the nervous system, manifesting in symptoms such as staggering gait and discharge from the mouth and eyes. It is crucial to distinguish rabies from canine distemper virus, which is the

most prevalent viral disease among raccoons. Neurological signs of distemper, including staggering gait and oral discharge, are virtually indistinguishable from those of rabies.

Taming the Trash Panda Problem

Although raccoons may appear adorable to observe, they can transform into pests. In suburban settings, they possess ample access to food, water, and relatively few predators. Regrettably, residing in such areas exposes them to their primary cause of mortality, vehicular accidents. Feeding wild animals leads to habituation to humans, which typically results in adverse outcomes for the animal. In 2002, Florida enacted legislation prohibiting the feeding of raccoons, bears, and foxes. Additionally, relocating nuisance raccoons is prohibited, necessitating their euthanasia. Apart from refraining from providing food, there are several measures we can adopt to prevent raccoons from becoming “trash pandas.”

Firstly, ensure that garbage cans are securely covered and latched, considering their remarkable ability to manipulate objects. Secondly, avoid leaving pet food out overnight, as raccoons are most active during this period. For persistent problem critters, motion-activated sprinklers, bright lights, or noise-making devices can be employed. To safeguard gardens, consider installing fencing or utilizing deterrent plants such as cucumbers or marigolds. Raccoons exhibit a strong aversion to distinct odors, including ammonia, vinegar, hot peppers, and peppermint.

Raccoons are virulent predators of eggs and hatchlings in both birds and reptile nests. They have an excellent sense of smell and can detect the scent of disturbed soil or the unique odor associated with a turtle nest's cavity. On beaches where raccoon predation is a problem many turtle monitoring groups will bury wire mesh to keep them from digging sea turtle and diamond back terrapin nests.