

Do You Know.....about raccoons?

Up until just a couple of years ago, rehabilitating raccoons was prohibited in the state of Maryland. Fortunately, thanks to the efforts of the Humane Society of the United States, the Maryland Wildlife Rehabilitators Association and area wildlife rehabilitators, the Department of Natural Resources was persuaded to change this regulation. Today, approximately five centers on Maryland are authorized to receive and care for Rabies Vector Species, and more rehabilitators will be applying for the permit in the not too distant future.

Why the prohibition? In the state of Maryland, raccoons, foxes, skunks and bats are considered to be vector species for the rabies virus, i.e. at high risk to contract and spread the deadly virus. Although other mammals can carry rabies, these species are the most likely vectors with raccoons being the number one carrier, hands down! The state felt the risk of exposure to rabies to be so great that no one should handle these animals. What they discovered was that, given no option other than euthanasia, citizens who found orphaned raccoons chose to try hand-raising the animals themselves rather than turning them over to Animal Control to be killed. It is no longer necessary for citizens to attempt to raise these animals but, often, they are so endearing that individuals want to keep them; either to try releasing them or to turn them into pets. You need to understand that there are many other risks besides rabies in attempting to raise a raccoon.

Raccoons carry a particularly nasty type of roundworm. Although it seldom does any real harm to the raccoon, it is capable of infesting any warm-blooded animal, including humans. Ingested by an atypical host, the roundworm larvae migrate to vital organs, resulting in the death of the host. A raccoon comes across the carcass, eats it (thus ingesting the roundworm larvae) and the roundworm completes its life cycle. Although this sequence of events can be halted in people who are properly diagnosed, it is certainly not something anyone wants to experience. If you know you have a large population of raccoons in your neighborhood, we suggest you wear gloves any time you are gardening! Additionally, raccoons can carry and spread parvo virus distemper, which can pose a danger for dogs and cats.



Juvenile raccoons enjoying their pool in one of our outdoor, pre-release cages.

The health risks from raccoons are actually minimal if you use common sense. NEVER handle a raccoon (or any other mammal) with your bare hands. Newborns can contract rabies prior to birth from an infected mother. Do not attempt to raise, or keep as a pet, ANY wild animal. At best, it will not survive. At worst, it will survive but will be hopelessly human-bonded, thus posing a risk to you, your pets, your children, your neighbors, your neighbors pets and your neighbors children. As wild animals sexually mature, they become very unpredictable. Because hand-raised wildlife is often not afraid of people, they are far more likely to bite. Even if you have raised a wild mammal from its birth to six-months-old, if it bites or even scratches someone, it is still considered wild and will be confiscated, euthanized and tested for rabies. Imagine how you would feel, your beloved "pet" had to be killed. If you find an orphaned raccoon, or any other wild animal, please get it to a licensed wildlife rehabilitator as soon as possible. These are trained and experience professionals who have the best possible chance of raising the wild animal properly and, ultimately,

returning it to the wild where it belongs. If you have wild animals visiting your yard, please simply enjoy the show. Do not feed them or encourage them to hang around. Many people believe that a wild raccoon in a residential area cannot possibly find enough food to survive and so start putting food out for it. Wild animals, especially raccoons, are very adaptable and quite capable of taking advantage of the bounty we unknowingly offer them. Feeding pets outside and unsecured trash cans are open invitations to all wild animals. Do not fool yourself; just because you live in a very developed area does not mean there are no wild animals around. As I mentioned before, wild animals are very adaptable and will take advantage of every easy meal.

Wild animals have three basic needs: food, water and shelter. If you have raccoon frequenting your yard, look around. Are you or your neighbors feeding pets outdoors? Are there unsecured trash cans or dumpsters around? Do you have a wood pile (especially stacked on the ground), brush piles, an elevated shed or crawl space under your deck where animals can den up? Wildlife is certainly capable of surviving in the wild; it does not need our help. If the habitat cannot support the animals, they will move on to more appropriate areas.

We at SCWC have known people who started feeding a single raccoon and, over a period of time, have found themselves supporting dozens of these animals. These people are then afraid to go on vacation for fear that "their" raccoons will starve if they are not there to feed them. This may, actually, be a valid fear as the supplemental feedings will encourage more raccoons to stay in what should be an unsuitable area if not for all the extra food provided by the well-meaning citizen.

Although mortality rates are very high among wild animals, most species do very well with no assistance from humans. Please, take a non-interference approach to our wild neighbors. If you are not sure whether an animal needs your help or not, give us a call before deciding to step in. Animals are a true joy to watch when we observe them from a distance. Do not forget that we are on top of the food chain and are considered the number one predator.

By Chris Montuori, staff