

BIOLOGY
NATURE RAMBLINGS



Raccoon

► A CHUBBY little bandit with the brain and dexterity of a second-story man no longer furnishes college sophomores with the touchstone of campus success, but the raccoon is the reason why many youngsters think Daddy was awfully fat while still a member of the Class of '28.

In those days, there was many an athlete who was a lithe demon on the gridiron and a Bacchus, at least in bodily outline, off it. So much for the effects of the coonskin coat.

Raccoons are relatively primitive animals in zoology's family tree, although they more than live up to the black burglar's mask Nature gave them. Like the hands of monkeys and men, the raccoon's paws are

unspecialized: they can be used for a variety of purposes, and usually are. They can unlatch chicken coop gates, husk sweet corn, break open a mussel shell or solve the special marauder-proof lid of a garbage can.

In zoos, raccoons have nearly the pulling power of the monkey house. They handle things incessantly, and in addition splash around fondly in the monkey's bane and horror—water.

It is not true, however, that raccoons instinctively wash everything before eating it. If a crayfish is covered with mud, back into the stream with it for a quick rinse. If an earthworm looks dry and wrinkled, let it soak for a time. The raccoon washes for a reason: despite his fabulous appetite, he cannot be accused of drooling over his food, for his mouth is poorly equipped with saliva glands.

He uses water to help him soften dry, harsh items on his menu. Give him a tree full of red-ripe cherries, or a fine fat frog, and there will be no time lost in needless scrubbing.

With mice, earthworms, birds, fruit, milk corn, frogs, fish, insects, turtle eggs, shellfish and clams on his diet the coon is no lank and stringy specimen. He spends most of his waking hours gorging himself, sleeps off the lethargy of an over-stuffed stomach, then begins another feast. The result is a well-rounded contour which makes raccoon a choice item at sportsmen's dinners, and lets him sleep away long winter weeks without so much as an acorn stored in his hollow tree.

When treed by dogs or backed into a tight spot with his family, however, the roly-poly raccoon is a fierce and reckless fighter. Any hound that lives to an old age after a life of coon-hunting will be covered with scars from slashing paws he could not dodge.

Wary old raccoons resort to many tricks to befuddle dogs hard on their heels. Instances are reported where a coon will lead a dog into a stream, jump on the dog's head from the bank, and thereupon ruthlessly drown the pursuer.

Science News Letter, October 17, 1953

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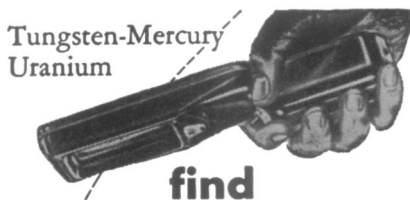
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