**What to Do About Raccoons**

*Adapted from the book Wild Neighbors*

From a raccoon’s point of view, humans make excellent neighbors. After all, raccoons don't know that our luscious vegetable gardens, uncapped chimneys, and full birdfeeders aren't there just for them. And when these clever critters take advantage of the food and shelter we (usually unintentionally) provide, they often get into trouble.

Requests for help with problem raccoons bring in a lot of money for “nuisance” wildlife control companies. We have a more effective, inexpensive, and humane solution: start with tolerance, learn how the problems begin, and practice prevention. Here's how.

# Getting Raccoons Out (and Keeping Them Out)

Bright lights, loud music, and wire mesh are the way to go. Evicting raccoons can result in separating dependent young from their mother if not done carefully. Before evicting raccoons from your house, you need to figure out how they're entering (that is, if you don't want them coming right back in).

Give your house a thorough inspection to find areas where raccoons could get in by viewing your house from the perspective of an animal looking for a den.

## Is there anybody in there?

To determine if an opening is being used, block the hole loosely with wadded newspaper. Leave in place for two to three days.

If the newspaper goes undisturbed, and the weather has not been particularly cold or stormy, no one is using it as an entryway. If the newspaper is pushed out of place, someone has moved in.

## Raccoon tenants

Once you know how they're getting in, find out if your unwanted guests happen to be a mother raccoon with young. If so, the best thing to do is wait a few weeks until the babies grow old enough to leave with their mother—they won't survive without her.

Don’t try to trap and relocate the family yourself. It almost always leads to separation (and probably death) of the young raccoons, unless done by a professional who knows how to reunite mothers with their offspring.

## One-way doors

Some professionals use a “one-way door” to get raccoons out of attics or crawl spaces. Once the animals have left, they're unable to get back inside. Use of these doors is best left to professionals, who can make sure that mothers are not isolated from their litters. The young must be old enough and mobile enough to exit through the one-way door with their mother, and this can be very hard to assess.

## Humane harassment to get them out

If you know that you are dealing solely with adults, you can start using humane techniques to get them to leave on their own.

**Start small.** Gentle techniques may be all you need. Try bright lights, loud noises (set a loud battery-operated radio in the attic or in the fireplace), and unpleasant smells (try a bowl of cider vinegar at the base of the chimney).
**Combine techniques.** Multisensory harassment works best: light, noise, and smell.
**Choose the right time**—at dusk, right before the mother’s normal activity period. Don’t drive raccoons out during the day. Raccoons are primarily nocturnal, so they may be confused in daylight, and they are certainly more vulnerable.

## Close all entries to keep them out

Convincing the raccoon to leave is only half the solution. The second step is to prevent raccoons (and other animals) from entering again. Many people put out a trap, catch the raccoon, and kill or relocate her. But unless you seal off entries into the house, there’s nothing to stop another animal from moving in.

Never close an entryway until you’re absolutely certain all the raccoons have left. For your own and the raccoon’s safety, you don’t want to trap a raccoon or her young inside your house.

Once you find possible points of entry, are sure no raccoons are inside, and have completed any necessary cleanup, cover all openings with heavy material, such as wire mesh, sheet metal, or metal flashing. The best wire mesh for the job is at least 16-gauge material (about 0.06 inches in diameter) with ½-inch openings.

**A note about raccoon waste:** In places where raccoons have lived for a long time, feces may have accumulated. Take care to avoid exposure to roundworm eggs, which can be found in raccoon feces. For safety’s sake, ideally, you should hire a professional service to clean up a raccoon latrine. If you must do the cleanup yourself, carefully follow guidelines established by the CDC for protecting yourself.

# Raccoons in the Attic or Chimney

Not unlike a real hollowed tree, a chimney makes the perfect place to call home to a raccoon mom and her family. Raccoons are more likely to visit in winter and spring, but they can and will get inside at any time of year. In spring, a mother may choose an attic or chimney as a safe spot for giving birth to and raising her young.

## Raccoons in the attic

As intelligent problem-solvers with great dexterity and determination, raccoons often find their way into attics at entry points where different building materials join. This might be where dormer junctions occur, where unpainted trim board creates structural defects, or where the building material itself is pliant, enabling them to push their way past, as is easily done with some plastic soffits.

### An ounce of prevention

Prevention—through routine inspection and repair—is the easiest, cheapest, and most humane approach. If your attic is already occupied, keep in mind that if there are baby raccoons present, they will be leaving with their mother once they have been weaned and are old enough to follow her on nocturnal forays (about six weeks of age).

They will typically take up residence in alternate den sites during the time in which their mother is teaching them how to cope on their own. If you can monitor the attic and determine that they've moved out, then repairs or exclusion can be done to prevent reentry.

## Raccoons in the chimney

When a mother raccoon sees an uncapped chimney, she sees a perfect nursery. It’s a safe and sheltered place to give birth to and raise her young until they are able to get around on their own.

The fireplace chimney is usually preferred because the horizontal "smoke shelf" is a convenient size to nestle with her kits, but she may also use the chimney venting a furnace.

Never use smoke or fire to drive animals out of chimneys! You will kill young raccoons not mature enough to climb and may even kill adults.

The good news for people who don’t welcome a nursery in their home is that the family will move out on its own. If you know you're dealing with only adult raccoons, you can use humane harassment techniques to get them to move out.

### Put a cap on it

Never attempt to install a chimney cap until you are certain that all animals have vacated the chimney.

Shine a light up the flue to make sure there are no raccoons on the damper and smoke shelf. Next, check the chimney flue from the roof (or have a chimney sweep do it) to make sure no animals are present.

As soon as the raccoons are gone, call a certified chimney sweep to clean your chimney of all nesting debris, and install a chimney cap.

If you're a do-it-yourselfer, be sure to purchase an approved chimney cap, and follow installation directions carefully to prevent future visits of the animal kind.

Check with a local certified chimney sweep about any local building codes regarding cap installation, and information on good venting practices, check out these recommendations.

## Call a professional

If more immediate and direct intervention is required to evict raccoons, then we strongly recommend hiring professional assistance. Evicting a raccoon can be difficult. There are potential safely risks to the homeowner and humane concerns for the raccoons if the eviction isn’t done properly. If you decide to solve the problem yourself, read our general guidelines for evicting and excluding raccoons.

# Raccoons in Walls, Ceilings, and Crawl Spaces

Although they may wind up in a wall or ceiling, raccoons get into buildings from an opening on the exterior.

While chimneys and attics are common raccoon homes, a resourceful raccoon can make a den just about anywhere in your house.

## Ceiling or walls

You may hear a raccoon above ceiling tiles in your house, or one may work her way down into wall voids from the attic or through an external entry hole. Sometimes a baby raccoon in an attic falls into a void and becomes trapped.

Rapping on the wall or ceiling at the spot where the sound is heard is a good way to check how mobile the animal is, and thus, whether likely to be an adult or dependent young.

When raccoons are heard in such difficult to access places, a professional should be hired to search for young. If there are no dependent young, you can use mild harassment to encourage an adult animal to leave.

## Ducts

Raccoons may use ductwork to explore or (less often) to den, and they can sometimes become trapped.

This requires a professional inspection, and ductwork may have to be taken apart to rescue the animal. Call a local wildlife professional or wildlife rehabber to have someone stand by to assist with humane removal of the raccoon.

## Crawl spaces

Raccoons may explore or attempt to live in crawl spaces, and sometimes use them as dens in which to bear and raise their young. Problems that can occur include the accumulation of raccoon waste in latrines and structural damage as, for example, when insulation is pulled down.

Depending upon the circumstances, including the age of raccoons involved, you may need to wait until the young can leave with their mother and/or hire professionals who can humanely evict the animals while keeping the raccoon family intact.

Depending upon the nature of the space and the amount of feces accumulated, it may be safest to get professional assistance with cleanup of a raccoon latrine before attempting other repairs.

## Ponds

Ornamental ponds attract raccoons. They’ll eat fish, frogs, or other aquatic life, and they may tear up plants while searching for food.

If your pond is at least three feet deep in places, try creating hiding places for the fish and frogs by stacking cinder blocks (the kind with the holes) next to one another in groups of three or four, piling rocks, or sinking sections of ceramic tile (the sort used to line chimneys).

In extreme cases, and where it is allowed and will not present a hazard for children or pets, you can erect single-strand electric fencing around the pond anywhere from four to eight inches off the ground.

# Raccoons and Public Health

Sleep is a raccoon's main event after a busy night foraging for food, but you may see them at any hour of the day.

Raccoons—along with foxes (red and gray), skunks, and bats—are considered a primary carrier of the rabies virus in the United States. While any warm-blooded animal can carry rabies, these are the ones we call “rabies vector species.”

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), only one human has ever died from the raccoon strain of rabies.

A rabid raccoon is usually dead within 1-3 days of becoming infectious, and even if you're bitten by a rabid raccoon, effective post-exposure treatment is available.

## Is that raccoon rabid?

If you see a raccoon in your yard during the day, don’t panic—she is not necessarily sick or dangerous. It’s perfectly normal for raccoons to be active throughout the day. She may merely be foraging longer hours to support her young, visiting a garden while the dogs are indoors, or moving to a new location. Seeing a raccoon during the day is no cause for panic. Key in on the behavior of the raccoon before calling for assistance. Look for:

* + Staggering gait
	+ An animal seemingly oblivious to noise or nearby movement
	+ Erratic wandering
	+ Discharge from eyes or mouth
	+ Wet and matted hair on face
	+ Repeated high-pitch vocalization
	+ Self-mutilation

If you see a raccoon showing these signs, call your local animal control or police department.

## Raccoon roundworm

Another growing concern is a roundworm ([*Baylisascaris*](http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/baylisascaris/)) found in raccoon feces that can infect humans and pets. Prevention is the key here. Keep raccoons out of attics and crawl spaces, and supervise young children and pets outdoors to make sure they don’t come into contact with raccoon feces. And if you find evidence of a raccoon latrine, make sure you clean it up properly.

## Leptospirosis

[Leptospirosis](http://www.cdc.gov/leptospirosis/) is caused by a bacteria that can infect raccoons, skunks, opossums, Norway rats, mice, and white-tailed deer. Humans may be exposed if they come into contact with infected urine or contaminated soil and water. Avoid touching wild animals. If contact is necessary to get a raccoon out of your house, call in a professional.

## Attacks and bites

It isn’t uncommon for a healthy raccoon to be active in the daytime, but it's highly unusual for a raccoon to be aggressive toward a person. A female may boldly defend her young, arching her back and growling or giving a loud “whoof,” and perhaps lunging at a person she deems threatening. Only very rarely will a raccoon chase after someone seen as threatening.

A raccoon who appears ill or disoriented, or who engages in unprovoked aggression, may be rabid or infected with canine distemper or feline parvovirus. If you come into contact with a wild animal, obtain professional assistance from your local animal control agency, and health department.

# Safe Cleanup of Raccoon Latrines

Never attempt to cleanup a raccoon latrine without proper equipment and protection.

Raccoons often leave their feces in communal sites called latrines.

Because raccoons are the primary host of [*Baylisascaris procyanis*](http://www.cdc.gov/parasites/baylisascaris/), a roundworm that can harm people, and the roundworm eggs may be present in raccoon feces, their latrines should be removed and cleaned up whenever they might pose a health hazard.  This task requires extreme caution.

Where might a raccoon latrine be? If not around the base of a tree or on a log, rock, stump, or woodpile, a raccoon latrine may be in an attic or a garage, or on a roof, deck, or patio. Raccoon latrines in or near a dwelling should be are considered a potential health hazard.

## Best left to the professionals

It is safest to hire a professional to do the cleanup, but if you must do it yourself, follow the CDC’s recommendations for doing it as safely as possible.

* Wear disposable gloves and either rubber boots that can be scrubbed or disposable booties that cover your shoes.
* Wear a N95-rated respirator (available at hardware stores).
* Use a spray bottle to mist the area to be cleaned up with water to minimize the dust that may be stirred up while cleaning up the latrine.
* Remove feces and feces-contaminated material using a shovel or inverted plastic bag; then, burn, bury, or bag it and send it to a landfill.
* If outside, treat feces-soiled surfaces with boiling water.
* If inside, repeatedly wipe the feces-contaminated area with a damp sponge, rinsing the sponge frequently in a bucket of hot, soapy water. Flush the water down the toilet when done.
* Disinfect the shovel and bucket with boiling water. Place the sponge in a plastic bag and throw it away.
* Scrub boots with hot soapy water or throw away disposable booties in a plastic bag.
* Dispose of gloves in a plastic bag and wash hands thoroughly with soap and warm running water.
* Wash clothing thoroughly with hot water and detergent, and wash hands again after putting clothing into the wash.
* Do not bring wood on which raccoon feces have been found into the house. Burn such logs outside.