

# Suburban Life

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## Raccoons

### Making your home theirs

By Jonathan Schechter  
special writer

**A** PERSISTENT scratching sound, followed by a dull thump on the roof awakens you. After fumbling for the phone you tell the operator, "I need the police, someone's breaking in."

The responding officers first cautiously check the house, then the yard as you wait anxiously in the brightly lit hall. One officer returns to the front door with a big grin and states, "Everything is all right folks, just a big old raccoon. I think it wants your attic for a home."

Raccoons, found throughout the Oakland County area, are skilled at making attics and chimneys their den sites. Some exterminators and less-than-reputable moonlighters are equally skilled at sizing up your desperate situation and charging hundreds of dollars. Sometimes their job is not very effective and might be done in a cruel manner.

Raccoons are here to stay, so your best defense against unwanted intrusions is understanding raccoon habits and knowing where to turn for help.

**TWENTY YEARS** ago most raccoons lived where they are most comfortable, inside big old hollow trees. Except for coon hunters and nature lovers, few residents paid any attention to the growing raccoon population.

With increased developments and the resulting destruction of den trees, a snowballing change began to occur. Raccoons that lost their traditional den sites soon discovered that attics and chimneys made excellent substitutes.

The problem quickly increased by leaps and bounds. If a raccoon gives birth to five or six young in an attic, the attic is all the pups will ever know as a home.

When the young raccoons head out to find their own homes, attics will be their prime selections, with trees being somewhat foreign to them.

It does not take a mathematician or wildlife biologist to see that a growing number of raccoons now seek out our homes for their homes. In many areas in Michigan, it is the rare raccoon that still lives in a tree.

**FOOD IS THE** second major factor in our blossoming raccoon population. In the wild, such delicacies as crayfish, berries, bird eggs, worms and grubs would be the main diet.

As available natural food supplies become less available, the intelligent raccoons become accustomed to garbage in garages and curbside, and feast on assortments of pizza crust, corn, peanut butter, cheese and most anything else we discard and they get their paws on.

Some raccoons have even perfected the skill of raiding backyard barbecues and hauling off the still warm treats. Unattended dog food bowls, vegetable gardens and fast food dumpsters also are all open invitations for a raccoon social gathering.

Raccoons are endowed with strong, sensitive paws, a good set of teeth and excellent sense of balance. Keeping them out of your attic is a challenge, but it can be done.

First, all chimneys should have high quality chimney caps installed. The caps let smoke and gasses out, and keep raccoons and other animals on the outside. They must be the kind that are bolted or clamped on, or they will be torn off by a raccoon that is out apartment hunting.

**ROOF VENTS** and attic louvers should also be covered with 1/4-inch hardware cloth to prevent entry. It is not practical to cut trees that raccoons might use to climb to the roof. They can use a downspout or the corner of bricks just as easily as we use ladders.

If you have pet food in the garage, do not leave

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— Jonathan Schechter  
Bloomfield naturalist

the door open at night. Without much effort, a roving raccoon will find a way to make a forcible entry from the garage into the ceiling and attic. Raccoons are not people-shy in suburbia, so most of all do not feed the raccoons that may wander by on nocturnal visits. If you do, before you know it, it will be back with the rest of the family and they will be planning on staying.

Someone is probably reading this now and getting more annoyed by the sentence because they are reading it too late. If you already have guests in the attic, don't panic. Read on. Do not call just anyone for help.

**YOU DO NOT** always get what you pay for in the raccoon-catching business. Various agencies can offer free assistance. It all depends on your local government and what their policy and program is.

If you are one of the lucky few who live in the right place, an animal control officer will help set up a live-trap to catch the raccoon and then pick it up for release elsewhere once it is caught.

If your local government isn't in the "raccoon busting" business, you should call the state Department of Natural Resources, the Michigan Humane Society or your local nature center.

None will come and do the catching for you, but they all will give advice and the phone numbers of individuals with state animal-control permits for live wild-animal removal.

When you call the numbers you are given, inquire as to their fees and methods. An extra word of caution is in order about exterminators who solicit through fliers and those who might be sub-contracted by firms listed in the yellow pages.

**SOME OUTFITS** and individuals won't quote a ceiling price, or will claim to have some sort of raccoon repellent powder.

Repellent powder does not exist, and one unrepentable firm last year claimed to spray powder into attics that would "make a raccoon disintegrate when touching it."

Leg traps and poisons are illegal so if you have any questions, contact the Department of Natural Resources.

If you want to try to catch the raccoon yourself, be sure to call the DNR for advice and legal guidelines. Remember, it is illegal to keep a wild animal and all mammals have the potential for carrying rabies.

Your first step in removing one of the "masked bandits" is buy a cage or renting a live-trap big enough to do the job. Some hardware stores have them available.

Try to figure out where the raccoon climbs down from the house at night. Paw prints may give it away. Remember that the raccoon is using your house for shelter and goes out on all but the coldest winter nights for food. Set the cage on the ground near where it climbs down.

**KEEP IN MIND** that raccoons dig, and will damage whatever is beneath the cage. Excellent baits to put in the cage include cooked chicken, sardines, pet food and most table scraps.

If you have a cat, keep it inside for the night or it will find the food before the raccoon does.

In a night or two, you will most likely have the coon in the cage.

In the spring be sure to check the raccoon carefully, while it is in the cage, to be sure it is not a nursing mother. Swollen nipples and a nasty disposition are the best indicators that she has young somewhere.

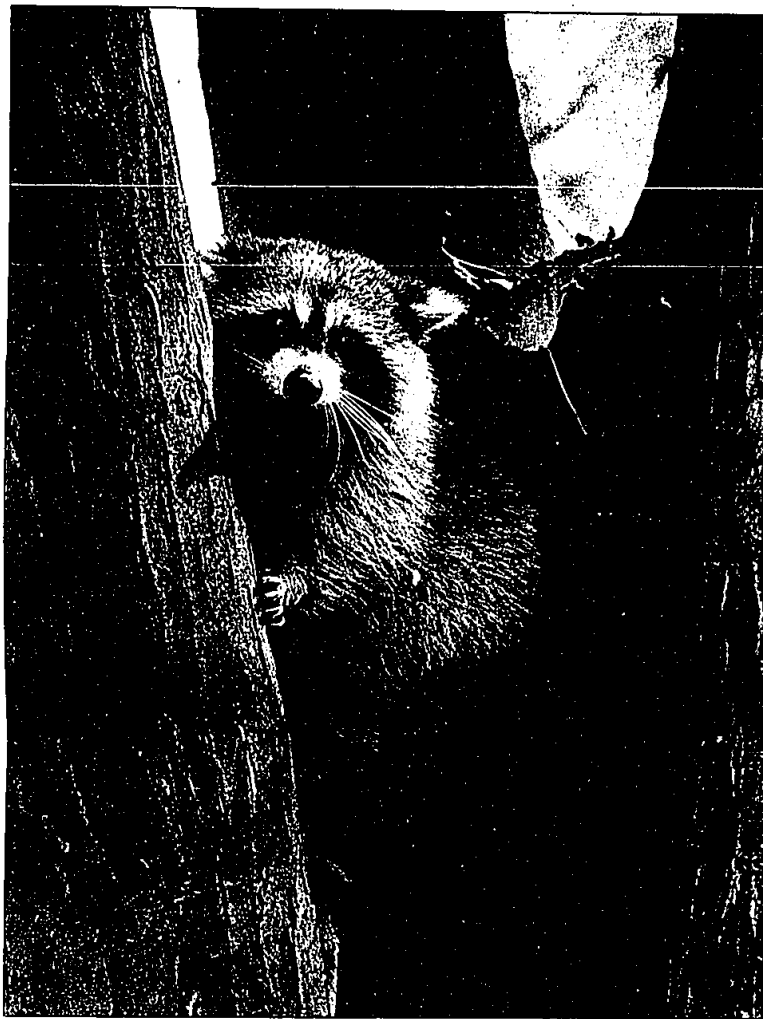
If she is a nursing mother you will have to do some belly crawling in the attic to reach the young who will probably be crying loudly from the corner of the attic. The noise will be a lot like noisy baby birds.

Raccoons are family animals so be sure all the animals are out before you make repairs. The captured raccoons should be transported at least 10 miles away so they don't wander back.

**IF A RACCOON** somehow makes it into the living area of your house through an open door, window or uncapped chimney, watch out. A cornered raccoon will defend itself, but would much rather have an escape route, so give it one. An open door or low window will do just fine. If the raccoon is in the basement, a plank leading up to a window will be a good path out, but the raccoon may not leave until dark.

Raccoons are here to stay. The more you learn about them, the more you may come to appreciate the way they have adapted to our changing environment.

(The writer is a Bloomfield Township resident and a naturalist.)



A raccoon up a tree is a cute critter, but put one in your attic and that's a different story.

## Live traps can nab 'bandits'

By Rich Swenson  
staff writer

Raccoons have always been a nuisance in the Oakland County area, and they're not likely to go away soon — if ever.

But local communities have developed animal control centers to help residents get rid of the pesky creatures.

Birmingham, Bloomfield Township and Southfield Township are housing havens for garbage-ravaging raccoons. With winter approaching, the creatures are once again looking for lodging in warm, dry shelters. Their favorite spots are attics, garages and fireplaces.

"They'll break loose when the snow comes," Southfield Township animal warden John Murphy said. "Raccoons don't like to get their paws wet, and they'll start breaking into houses looking for places to live for the winter."

**THE WAY** to battle back against raccoons isn't with poison, snares or leg traps — which are all illegal — but with live traps, according to animal control officials.

Bloomfield Township has 30 of these cages, Southfield Township 20 and Birmingham six. All three loan live traps free of charge.

In fact, in Southfield and Bloomfield townships, animal wardens will go one step further — they'll pick up any raccoon that has been trapped and personally deliver it to the "northern wilderness."

"We'd rather handle them," Murphy said. "They can be very unpredictable."

Birmingham loans traps, but the rest is up to the residents.

"We have traps available, but residents are responsible for catching the raccoons

and letting them go," Birmingham animal control officer Linda Chase said.

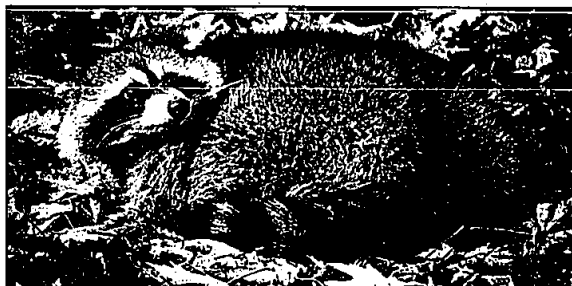
**CHASE ADVISES** that residents be careful when letting the raccoons loose.

"Raccoons aren't dangerous unless their cornered," she said. "They're not overly aggressive, but they will defend themselves."

Bloomfield Township animal control officer Mike Lagerou said now is the time to catch them.

"It's better to trap and relocate them before they start having offspring," he said. "In February, there'll be tons of requests (for traps) because many of the babies will be born."

Officials from all three communities recommend against hiring private companies because they generally charge exorbitant rates — with no guarantee that the raccoons won't return.



Confronted by a human at close range, a raccoon is just a bewildered, cowering animal not sure just what to do.

Staff photos  
by  
Mindy Saunders

Oakland County communities will loan live animal traps free of charge to homeowner. Southfield animal wardens and others will pick up trapped raccoons and personally deliver them to wilderness areas.