WILDLIFE
management guide

Wildlife Management Section
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Raccoon

Raccoons use a wide variety of habitats, generally preferring areas with an interspersion of different successional stages but within a high proportion of mature hardwoods.

Bottomland hardwoods supply hard mast, aquatic animal life and den trees. Fields and open areas produce fruit, berries, insects and occasional small mammals and reptiles. Raccoons depend on wetland and aquatic habitats for a large portion of their food and are seldom found far from water. Habitats frequented, ranked by preference, are:

1. Bottomland hardwood forest
2. Marshes and associated wetlands
3. Upland hardwood forest
4. Pine hardwood forest
5. Cultivated areas
6. Open fields with tall weeds and broomsedge
7. Pine forest

Raccoons usually travel along water courses and drains, making side-trips to feeding grounds.

HABITAT REQUIREMENTS

▲ *Food*

Raccoons are opportunistic omnivores. Availability of food largely determines diet which is roughly 2:1 plant to animal matter. While raccoons eat a wide variety of foods, acorns are the most important component of their diet. In many areas, raccoon population densities are determined by the acorn production on a site. Raccoons are voracious eaters and tend to return to the same location as long as food is available. A thick layer of fat is deposited in the fall in preparation for overwintering. Raccoons are not true hibernators, but may sleep for extended periods in the mountains and piedmont during extremely low temperatures.

▲ *Favored raccoon foods include:*

Soft Mast

grape
persimmon
greenbrier
blackberry
sugarberry
possum-haw
rattan-vine
black cherry
wild plum
privet
eastern redcedar
hawthorn
crabapple
apple
dogwood
serviceberry
blueberry

Hard Mast

acorns
beechnuts
pecans

Foods associated with Man

grains
corn
garbage
chufa

Animal Matter

beetles
eggs
grasshoppers
carrion
grubs
earthworms
mice
cotton rats
birds
crayfish
mussels
snails
crabs
aquatic insects
frogs
lizards
salamanders
snakes
fish

▲ *Cover*

Ground dens and cavity trees are used for shelter and escape, but den trees are preferred for raising the young.

Suitable ground dens include old woodchuck or fox burrows, rock crevices, downed trees, abandoned buildings and brushpiles.

Active den trees can sometimes be recognized by claw marks or worn bark. The dens are usually in, or just below, the tree canopy. Preferred cavities have 4 to 10 inch openings, face away from the prevailing wind, are 15 feet or more from the ground, and are sheltered from rain.

▲ *Water*

Raccoons must drink water daily. Shorelines of open water also provide excellent feeding habitat.

▲ *Home Range*

Home range size is extremely variable depending upon the quality of the habitat, the sex and age of the animal and the variety of food sources. Most raccoon home ranges are between 100 and 250 acres. Raccoons may move long distances when populations are low and food is scarce. Home ranges may be varied seasonally to take advantage of changing food sources. Home ranges increase for males in late winter as a result of breeding activity.

POPULATION DENSITIES

Population densities are:

Piedmont and Foothills: one raccoon/20-200 acres

Coastal Plain:

one raccoon/5-30 acres in bottomland hardwoods, and swamps

Normally, females produce one litter of three to five young in late April to early June. Mortality of young is more often attributed to disease, parasitism or malnutrition then predation. In well managed populations, survival of young is high. Young of the year make up approximately 35 percent of the population by early winter.

STANDARD MANAGEMENT PRACTICES

Harvest 8 to 10 percent of an area in 3 or 4 widely spaced stands every 10 years. This will provide a stand distribution that will make fruit, mast, and insect production available to most home ranges over the long term.

Where oak-gum-cypress types occur in pockets or bands along streams, retain stands of mast-bearing age on at least one side of the stream.

Raccoon population densities will be determined more by the proportion of mature hardwoods maintained on a property than any other habitat variable.

▲ *Rotation*

Use a minimum rotation of 100 years for hardwood stands. This will result in the high levels of mast production and increased number of den cavities associated with older, larger trees. Retain hardwood inclusions in extensive pinelands of the Piedmont and Coastal Plain.

▲ *Regeneration*

Any regeneration method appropriate to the landform of the area is suitable if cuts are well distributed so that fruit, mast, and den tree requirements are met within a given home range. Do not disturb habitat under the crowns of den trees to be retained.

Retain a minimum of 30 percent of a stand in mast producing hardwoods, and retain trees with large cavities.

Transition areas are especially valuable for fruit production. Leave clumps of grapevines, hawthorns, dogwood, serviceberry, and other fruit producing shrubs.

Fruit and insect production in regenerated areas can last for 7 to 10 years in the mountains, and 5 to 7 years in the Piedmont and Coastal Plain. Do not use herbicides.

Keep normally wet sites, pond fringes, and seeps clear of slash during site preparation. Do not drain wetlands. Streamside Management Zones (SMZs) are high use areas by raccoons - avoid harvesting timber near these areas.

▲ *Intermediate Treatments*

Retain or establish a variety of fruiting trees and shrubs on hardwood sites. Do not cut grapevines.

If den trees are scarce, retain some small den trees that have the potential to develop larger cavities.

Thin hardwoods to encourage full crowns, vigorous growth, and heavy mast production. Favor the red oak group 2:1 over the white oak group. Thin pine types early and regularly to maintain mast producing trees and shrubs in the understory. Retain a minimum of 30 percent in well distributed mast producing hardwoods. Blackgum and beech should comprise 10 percent of hardwood stands, or be retained as inclusions in pine types. Encourage and retain black cherry, pecan, hackberry, wild plum, persimmon, crab apple and eastern red cedar.

▲ *Prescribed Burning*

Hardwood or pine-hardwood stands should not be burned. Prescribed burning in pine stands can stimulate understory fruiting plants and insect producing grasses and forbs.

Prescribed burning can be used to maintain openings.

DIRECT IMPROVEMENTS TO HABITAT

Establish mast capability in areas where mast needs are not met through forest composition by:

- carrying stands beyond rotation age until mast production in replacement stands is sufficient
- removing overtopping trees from grape, plum, and greenbrier thickets, hawthorn patches, persimmon, pawpaw, crab apples, and persimmon
- retaining grape thickets on north slopes and coves in the mountains
- retaining old home sites
- planting soft mast species, such as plum, crab apple, and persimmon

Old, large den trees should be preserved, especially live oak, yellow poplar, magnolia, and cypress.

Artificial den boxes may be used in areas with few natural cavities. In areas with sufficient natural cavities, den boxes will not be utilized.

Leave unharvested small areas of grain crops adjacent to woodlands and plant annual food plots to grains. Preferred plantings for raccoons are corn, peanuts and chufas.

OTHER SPECIES THAT BENEFIT FROM RACCOON MANAGEMENT

Numerous game and nongame species benefit from raccoon management. Rather than focusing solely on raccoons, management plans should emphasize the communities of which raccoons are a part.

The following species are common raccoon associates:

wild turkey	gray squirrel
white-tailed deer	black bear
flying squirrel	opossum
pileated woodpecker	common flicker
wood duck	screech owl
great horned owl	red-shouldered hawk
gray fox	

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