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RACCOON DAMAGE CONTROL*

by

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Raccoons are found throughout the United States, and in most cases they are expanding their range into previously unoccupied habitats. Raccoons are often water-associated, but in the Great Plains they often occur a considerable distance from water. In the Great Plains states, the expansion of agriculture has apparently allowed raccoons to move westward and northward. It is possible that the availability of old homesteads, buildings, haystacks, dumps, and towns has been instrumental in allowing raccoons to survive the winter.

I won't waste time trying to describe the habits of raccoons since most people are familiar with them. One trait, of course, that is very important is that they will eat almost anything that is available, and this often gets them into trouble.

Most people recognize the attractiveness of sweet corn for raccoons, and I have long held the opinion that this was the number 1 damage problem for this species. However, I decided to be safe rather than sorry, so I conducted a biased, non-random survey of biologists, extension specialists, and researchers in several states. My sampling scheme was to call old friends in several states and quiz them on raccoon damage and control. I spoke with individuals in Oregon, Ohio, Colorado, Nebraska, New York, Michigan, Louisiana, and South Dakota. No one felt that raccoons were a significant problem in their area, but everyone felt that sweet corn damage was their number 1 problem with raccoons. After that it was an open ball game. Poultry damage was probably the next important. Additional problems were in feed lots, watermelon patches, living in and tearing up buildings, damage to pets (or problems with pet raccoons), trash can problems, parasites and diseases, and destruction of waterfowl and upland bird nests. I am sure that additional problems could be listed, but this shows the range of problems. One person even remarked that raccoons were his most consistent competitor on his favorite crayfish stream.

When asked for their control recommendation, electric fencing was considered the best, wherever practical. Electric fences were most effective when placed outside a regular fence. The electric fence should be installed 8-12 inches off the ground and 4-6 inches outside the other fence. This control is usually effective around small gardens and poultry pens and yards. If the raccoons are using regular pathways, trapping can be very effective. In South Dakota we often recommend the use of a live-trap (for which we distribute construction plans). No. 2 coil spring traps are also fairly effective, and raccoons are usually easy to trap.

Many people, however, do not want to kill the raccoons, and, for them, only non-lethal control techniques are acceptable. One that occasionally works is to tie a dog (preferably a barker) in a small corn patch. This method often works, but it can also cause a lot of lost sleep. Lights and/or a radio tuned to an all night station may occasionally keep a shy raccoon out of an area (some people, however, swear that the music is like a party invitation).

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A large number of household spices, such as pepper, and various other chemicals have been used as repellents, and they do occasionally work because some people swear by them. The most commonly recommended repellent is Allyl Isothiocyanate, commonly known as oil-of-mustard. The suggested mixture is one ounce of the oil and one ounce of household detergent added to one gallon of water. The mix is then sprayed on the ground around the plants. I understand that the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service has conducted some studies on the use of this for controlling dogs and found it to be highly ineffective without the additional use of disciplinary action against the dog, so I would question its effectiveness against raccoons. (At this point, the audience members were asked how many had ever used oil-of-mustard as a repellent against raccoons. No one in the audience had ever used this product as a repellent. This points out an important problem for people who make animal damage control recommendations. The recommendation for using oil-of-mustard appears in almost every single publication that discusses the control of raccoons. Yet at a workshop gathering of specialists in this area, not one person had ever actually tried it. People who work in this area should be constantly aware of this problem and should not make recommendations for use of products for which they are unaware of the results. This can lead to the inevitable credibility gap between the specialist and the people whom he is advising. It is something we should all be aware of and take constant vigilance against.)

If you do wish to use oil-of-mustard, you may find it very difficult to obtain. I have yet to hear of a drug store that stocks it normally. Don't bother writing to the often quoted address of Magnus, Mabee, and Reynard of New York because they no longer sell it. The only manufacturer I know of is Bacon Chemical Company in New York City (224 LaFayette Street, 10012). They sell it for \$4.95 a pound in five pound bottles or \$3.95 a pound in 400 pound drums (which seems a bit excessive for the standard sweet corn patch). Most drug supply houses can provide it to druggists and pharmacists. One such is McKesson Robbins Drug Company with distribution points in Minneapolis, Omaha, and Sioux City, Iowa.

There is no doubt that, in some cases, poisoning programs can be very effective in controlling raccoons. This is particularly true with strychnine treated eggs. In a South Dakota study it was found that 87% of the raccoon population in a 25-square-mile test area could be reached by eggs treated with a chemosterilant. However, the use of poisons for killing raccoons is illegal in most states and, in any case, it would be almost impossible to justify such a program since the damage is not significant.

It is important to point out that the raccoon is one of our most valuable fur bearing animals. Raccoon fur is used for coats, collars, muffs, trimming, and sometimes, hats. In some parts of the country, the flesh of young raccoons is used for food quite extensively. The sporting value of the raccoon is well known to many hunters and trappers. In South Dakota in 1971 during the winter about 15,000 raccoons were taken by trappers and sold for fur. During the 1973-74 winter season 35,562 raccoons were taken for fur. They were sold at an average value of \$10.41 each for a total value of over \$370,000. During the current 1975-76 fur season, prices for raccoons are very high, and it is estimated that an even larger number of raccoons will be taken. In South Dakota few hunters use dogs for chasing and killing raccoons, but in other states, such as Missouri, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio, and Kentucky, hunting raccoons with dogs is a very popular sport. It has been estimated that, in Missouri, over 72% of all raccoons taken are by hunters with dogs while the remainder are trapped. The legal status of the raccoon in the various states will give some clue to its value. In South Dakota the raccoon has no status as a game animal or fur bearer and may be taken at any season of the year. In Nebraska and most other states, however, the raccoon is considered a game or fur bearing animal, and there is a season set on the animal, primarily during the fur harvest season.

Because of the fine sporting qualities of this animal and its value as a fur bearing animal, it would be almost impossible to justify any sort of a large control program against raccoons. At the present time in most states damage by raccoons is handled by removing the damaging individual animal or using preventative measures, and this is probably the best approach to take.