

Raccoon migration

By Kerri Savage



Apparently, people are not the only ones moving to Alberta in the last few decades. The common raccoon, once a rare sighting in our province is also finding Alberta a comfortable place to settle in.

While raccoons can be found throughout the province, our cold winters are the biggest natural control for Alberta raccoon populations. Though sightings are more common, their populations have not seen such significant increases in the last decade for the raccoon to be determined a pest in our province.

Raccoons live quite comfortably along side human populations and their numbers, once limited to more rural locations, have started to increase in urban centres. This is most noticeable in areas south of the Bow River and the South Saskatchewan River. Raccoons are rarely seen in daylight hours as they are primarily nocturnal. Raccoons prefer to live near water sources such as lakes, rivers, marshes or streams, using the natural cover of trees and shrubs. They often like to wash or dip their food in water.

Seemingly harmless with their distinctive black mask and banded tail, raccoons can be a major cause of disease transmission, bird population decreases and agricultural damage. A raccoon's diet is quite diverse, feeding on fruit, vegetables and berries, grain, insects, frogs, birds and their eggs and small mammals.

Because of this varied diet, raccoons can become pests by damaging gardens and crops seeking peas, potatoes and corn. They have also become very resourceful at getting in to garbage bins and cans and will spread refuse around yards and parks. In southern Alberta, they have become adept looting bluebird nest boxes.

Avery, age 6, is researching the raccoon as part of the Needs of Plants and Animals curriculum unit in Grade 1. She says, "Raccoons are really cute but they make a mess. You don't want one to live in your yard. They like to make a mess of your garbage and are very clever."

She adds, "Raccoons are a real problem in cities like Toronto. They cause a lot of damage to houses even. I keep looking to see a raccoon here in Calgary but haven't been able to spot one. They like to sleep during the day and my mom won't let me stay up during the night to see if I can spot a raccoon."

It may be a while yet before Avery will be able to see a raccoon in Calgary. The city's Weaselhead Society has been tracking raccoon sightings in south Calgary. Though one of their members actually spotted an adult raccoon asleep in a large balsam poplar tree, there have been less than ten sightings by members over the past two years.