

The Wild Animal That Doesn't Belong in Your Home

They may look cuddly and cute, but don't think for a second that they make good pets. Not only will you be unable to find a vet willing to provide care, you'll be a 24-hour-a-day warden for the next 10 to 15 years as you struggle to safeguard your home and protect your family and pets.

Analysis by Dr. Karen Shaw Becker

STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- As cute and cuddly as raccoons look, the truth is they don't make good pets. It's illegal to take any animal from the wild, but sadly you can buy baby raccoons from licensed exotic animal breeders. I do not recommend that people do this
- Raccoons are very clever and mischievous. Left unsupervised, they can quickly destroy a home and its furnishings. Adult raccoons in particular can also be unpredictable around both humans and pets
- It is difficult to find veterinarians and pet sitters to care for pet raccoons, and they harbor many diseases that can pose health risks to you and your family
- Raccoons purchased as pets can no longer survive in the wild, so human guardians must be prepared to take on a 10 to 15 year commitment to an animal that often requires 24/7 supervision

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Because they are so cute and precocious, many people wonder if raccoons make good pets. My answer is always, in a word, "No."

Raccoons are wild animals. It's unethical and illegal to capture a healthy wild animal and force it live out the rest of its life in confinement for any reason, and especially simply to amuse its human captors. Licensed wildlife rehabilitators are trained to care for sick or injured raccoons until they can be returned to the wild. They are also trained to prevent young animals from becoming imprinted, or socialized to humans and domestic animals.

However, some rehabbed animals have permanent injuries that prevent them from surviving in the wild. Rehab facilities or wildlife educators can apply for special permits that allow them to provide care to these animals for the rest of their lives. A part of the criteria for maintaining a permanently injured wild animal is to demonstrate that you are capable of providing a species-appropriate diet, ample sized enclosures with natural environmental enrichment, exercise, and foraging opportunities.

The opossum I care for, Cordelia, is an example. She couldn't survive in the wild because her vision is so impaired. My options as a federally licensed wildlife rehabilitator were to euthanize her, or apply for a permit for her to become a wildlife educational animal, which is what I did.

Unfortunately, people seem to be attracted to rare or unique pets, including wild animals. This has led to exotic animal breeders acquiring permits to breed and sell animals that, in my opinion, should never be pets. Raccoons fall into this category.

10 Reasons Raccoons Don't Make Good Pets

1. I can't stress this enough: "Raccoon" and "pet" are mutually exclusive terms. Raccoons are wild animals, not pets, and even "tamed" are extremely high maintenance and require an experienced, knowledgeable guardian. Even several generations of captive bred raccoons still exhibit all of their wild instincts throughout their lives.
2. It's illegal in certain states to keep raccoons as pets.¹
3. Housing a raccoon can be an insurmountable challenge. Allowing him the run of your house isn't feasible, as this little fellow is tremendously destructive to belongings (including door moldings and furniture) and unpredictable around both humans and pets. However, locking a raccoon in a cage, a bedroom, or other confined space is simply caging a wild animal, which is inhumane.
4. Raccoons aren't easily house trained, so unless you can train her to use a litter box somewhat consistently, or convince her to walk on a leash and you're prepared to take her outdoors on her (unpredictable) schedule to do her business, she'll be relieving herself around your house.
5. Raccoons are notorious biters. They will bite family members, family pets, and visitors and their pets. Translation: raccoons are a medical and insurance liability.
6. Many veterinarians have little or no experience treating raccoons, so finding healthcare for a sick raccoon could be challenging. When visiting a vet, you must show proof of purchase, or there's no way to prove you did not illegally take the animal from the wild. If you own a raccoon that was taken from the wild, you are at risk of having the animal confiscated and being fined.

Raccoons can also carry zoonotic **parasites** and infectious diseases (including rabies) that pose a threat to you, your family, and other pets.

7. If you need or want to take a trip away from home, finding a raccoon sitter could be more challenging than finding a raccoon vet.
8. Raccoons are master thieves. That's why they're called "masked bandits." Those adorable little human-like fingers on his front paws are quite capable of breaking into virtually any locked, latched, or otherwise secured spot in your home.
9. A pet raccoon requires LOTS of your time, attention, and supervision — for 10 or 15 years, which is the normal lifespan of a healthy, well-cared for raccoon. And you must arrange for someone to care for her if something happens to you, because once they've been kept as pets, raccoons can't be released back into the wild.
10. Raccoons act out when they're unhappy and hormonal. Their natural instinct is to bite when they're angry, frustrated, or stressed.

However, raccoon guardians also tell stories of other ways in which their little guys or gals deliver payback, including "repotting" house plants, removing buttons from clothing someone was silly enough to leave around, moving belongings to other locations and sometimes peeing on them for good measure, flipping over water bowls, dumping the contents of bookcases, and stripping the bed sheets.²

Why Not Consider Adopting a Real Pet?

I realize there are passionate pet raccoon advocates out there (and I'm sure I'll hear from a few as soon as this article publishes). However, my experience has been that many legally purchased baby raccoons grow up to be unpredictable adults, end up with behavior issues, and ultimately are euthanized. My point in writing this article is to prevent this from happening by encouraging people who may be contemplating purchasing a wild animal as a pet to rethink their choice.

This spring, some of you may find an adorable wild baby raccoon that needs your help. It's illegal to care for wild animals without a license. I agree with this law, as it protects wild animals (assuring they get the proper care they need) and also protects the public (wild animals carry many parasites and infectious diseases that can harm or kill people). Please contact a local wildlife rehabilitator if you find a wild baby animal that appears to need help.

Please keep in mind that there are many homeless domestic pets — dogs, cats, birds, hamsters, gerbils, rabbits, and others — in shelters and foster homes across the land that would be forever grateful for a spot in your home and heart. So I'd just ask you to consider this: Why bring home a wild animal who prefers living wild, when so many real pets are waiting hopefully at your local shelter?

Sources and References

[Washington Post September 1, 2014](#)

[Bad Raccoon](#)

[About.com](#)

¹ [MyPetRaccoons.com](#)

² [Remocoon](#)
