

The Raccoon - A Predator or A Talented Scavenger?
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Most people don't think of the raccoon as being a predator. Instead, he's often thought of as a talented scavenger. We are all aware of his fondness for ripe corn, and many trashcans have been de-lidded and dumped over by a raccoon looking for an easy meal. If I were to make a list of all the things a raccoon will eat, it would go on and on. With so much food available for raccoons, you wouldn't think they would resort to raiding hen houses. But they do, and they're not looking for eggs either.

The first time my Mom found a couple of her chickens killed and partially eaten I suspected a free roaming dog. Weasels are scarce here and if a fox had done the killing he probably would have carried the chicken more than just a few feet from the hen house to eat it.

We decided to set a large baited live trap in the doorway of the hen house, so any varmint trying to gain entry would have to get by the trap first. The location was a good one, for the next morning we had the culprit: a large boar raccoon.

Several years had passed without another chicken being killed and I was beginning to think that it was just an isolated incident when my Mom lost her chickens to that raccoon.

But a few years ago the raccoons struck again, and this time with a vengeance. Mom lost four chickens in one night and our neighbor, who lives no more than 500 feet away, found 14 of his pullets killed the same morning.

None of the chickens were eaten completely. They just had a bite or two taken from their neck or breast. It is very similar to the way a raccoon works over a cornfield, pulling down dozens of ears in a feeding frenzy.

I went about trapping this raccoon a bit differently. I closed both of the doors on the hen house to make sure the raccoon couldn't get back in at night, and placed a live trap near the small door that the chickens used for getting in and out of their run. The following morning the raccoon was waiting for me in the live trap. I reset it and left it in place for a week without another catch.

At that time I was raising a beef steer and feeding him in the big barn, several yards away from the hen house. Something had been helping itself to hefty portions of the grain that I was feeding to the steer. This grain was mainly ground corn, cob and all, along with spelt, alfalfa meal and a lot of molasses.

I could see a faint trail coming from a hole under the barn and leading to the big sack of grain, which was quickly becoming a small sack of grain. I moved the grain sack to the safety of the grain bin and replaced it with a live trap, baited with some of the grain that was being eaten.

I wasn't surprised to find a large and well-fed raccoon in the trap the next day. If I had dressed this grain-fed raccoon out it would have been graded as USDA Prime. His high protein diet surely had something to do with his excellent condition.

I have a theory that raccoons are all a little bit different and all have certain preferences. Perhaps it is mainly the larger, more experienced raccoons that consider chickens an easy meal. I am sure the raccoons still visit the barnyard at night, but so far they're only interested in the cat food my Mom puts out by the back door.

My brother raises turtles on the farm, and since he fenced in his turtle pond his losses have been held at two. He's an avid fisherman but became a raccoon trapper last summer when two of his prized turtles were crudely dismembered and eaten by raccoons.

This all goes to show that you never know what to expect from wild animals. Not all raccoons will kill chickens, and so far the coyotes haven't shown any interest in eating our calves. But many animals are opportunists, and it is their nature to feed on whatever is convenient for them at a given time.

If you have livestock, even on a small scale as we do, you are likely to have some sort of depredation at one time or another. Don't jump to conclusions about what kind of animal did the damage. Instead, look for clues at the scene of the crime.

Our neighbor did this and found blood stained raccoon prints which showed him exactly where to place a body gripper to remove his chicken killing raccoon. Talk to other farmers as they may have had similar losses and could possibly help you solve your problems with predators. Better yet, seek the advice of a local trapper. There is no better place to find ten solutions to a single problem than an OSTA Convention.