

Raccoons rampant

Last July I devoted this column to a family of baby raccoons my wife and I befriended at our home on Johnson Creek. I took pity on the four little guys and their gaunt mother, starving in the worst of the drought, and allowed them to share a little of the food put out for our cats.

On Tuesday evening of last week, I paid a stiff price for that soft-heartedness. I was attacked by the five raccoons and suffered 17 fang punctures on my legs, and am now taking the infamous series of rabies injections.

This is being reported not to solicit sympathy but as a story from which readers may learn something important about feeding wildlife.

Although rabies is rare in raccoons, it can't be ruled out, especially in the presence of aberrant behavior.

All species of mammals, including domestic livestock and whitetail deer, as well as dogs and cats, are subject to this dread disease. Skunks and bats are common rabies carriers, as are foxes. The only confirmed case of rabies in West Kerr County this year was in a gray fox near Mountain Home, only a few miles from my place. There is no known treatment once the disease develops, and it is always – repeat: always — fatal. Any exposure to the virus must be taken very seriously.

The good news is that the modern rabies vaccination series is not the horror story it used to be – no longer 14 agonizing horse-serum shots in the abdomen. Injections are given in the upper arm and are no more painful than a flu shot. I'll have to take only five.

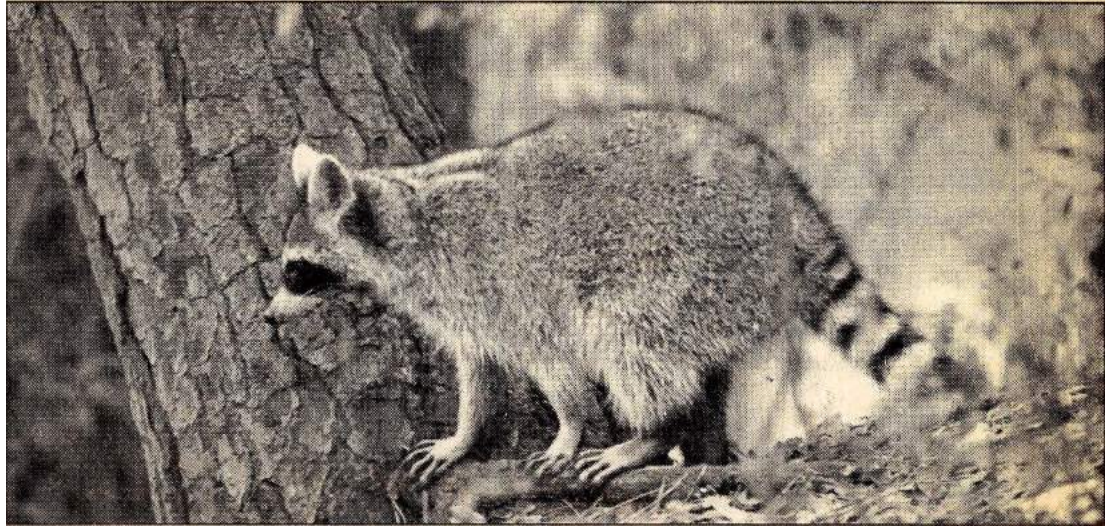


Photo by John Wootters

The antics of raccoons are charming and entertaining, but there's another and more vicious side to the 'coon personality pictured in the comic strip "Over The Hedge," as the author painfully discovered last week.

Currently Outdoors



My battle with the raccoons began at dusk when I observed through a glass door that the 'coon family was swarming over my Kawasaki Mule utility vehicle parked outside, trying to get to a bag of dry cat food in the Mule's glove compartment. I went out to shoo them away, and things went very steeply downhill from there.

The short walkway from the door to the driveway is densely planted on both sides with rosemary, sotol and Texas sage. The raccoons did vacate the Mule at my

appearance, but did not run away. There was much scurrying around under the bushes with a chorus of raccoon snorting and snarling. One of the "babies" (now almost as large as their mother) stopped where I could see it under a sotol, and, exasperated by the animals' defiance, I threw a small rock at the visible coon. He squealed and snarled, causing another flurry of growling and rushing around

under the shrubbery.

With typical human arrogance, I assumed the 'coons had been routed and proceeded to walk around to get into the Mule. The route took me within 18 inches of the nearest rosemary bush. Without warning, a snarling raccoon darted out of the landscaping and sank its teeth into my left ankle! She (I believe it was the mother) began climbing my leg, clawing and biting as she went. No weapon of any kind was at hand, and I could only try to shake or knock her off against the Mule, but she stuck tight.

At this point she got reinforcements. A second 'coon rushed out and chomped onto my other ankle. I got one good chance at this one and punted him about four feet. I got pretty good hang time, but to my astonishment, he whirled when he hit the ground and charged straight back at me.

In the melee, I wasn't sure how many different animals attacked me; I wasn't keeping count, but the others were still snorting and squealing and thrashing around out of sight beneath the shrubbery. The whole battle lasted maybe three or four minutes, but it seemed a lot longer to me, with a raccoon biting savagely on each leg! The denim of my jeans provided little protection from their fangs. I was wildly fighting, kicking and stamping the whole time ... but losing.

Afraid to use my hands to try to dislodge the animal on my left hip for fear of getting them chewed up, I finally grabbed a half-full water bottle out of the Mule to beat the bigger 'coon off. The plastic bottle made a poor club, but

she did turn loose and took the whole family away into the gathering darkness amid a menacing chorus of growling and snorting.

On my doctor's advice, I went straight to the emergency room of Sid Petersen Memorial Hospital, where my fang wounds were cleansed and injected with a drop of anti-rabies vaccine in each puncture. Then the remainder of the syringe was injected into my hip. I also got a tetanus vaccination and a prescription for a potent antibiotic to ward off infection from the bites. Altogether it was a perfectly rotten way to spend an evening.

Janie Roman of Kerr County Animal Control interviewed me at the ER and pledged the cooperation of her department in removal of the offending raccoons, now considered intolerably dangerous, from my property. So far, three have been trapped and that campaign continues.

Why these raccoons dared to attack a grown man without what seems to us provocation, or why the attack was so prolonged, are open questions.

The least pleasant explanation, of course, is that one or more of the animals were already suffering the onset of rabies, which makes its victims abnormally aggressive and robs them of all caution.

Another is that when the young 'coon squealed upon the impact of my rock, the mother rushed blindly to its defense.

But the most likely theory is that I unintentionally violated the animal's "fight-or-flight" zone when I passed so close to the shrubbery under which she was hiding, causing her to attack out of pure

panic.

All animals — including humans — have an invisible radius within which they feel safe. The size of this zone may vary with the animal's emotional state and the situation, but a perceived enemy violating the zone will trigger one of the two reactions, a preemptive attack or head-long retreat. If the intruder is very close, the former response is more likely. I suddenly but unknowingly appeared only a few inches from the larger 'coon, and she instinctively attacked that part of me that she could see.

Her strength, courage, and tenacity when the battle became hand-to-claw were no surprise; I've seen raccoons whip trained coonhounds of three times their weight and knew that an aroused raccoon is a truly formidable fighter. I just never envisioned myself on the receiving end of that desperate fury.

There will be no more feeding of 'coons around our house, and I wholeheartedly commend that policy to every reader. My moment of pity for the hungry babies six months ago not only resulted in my trip to the hospital and a course of rabies vaccine but also, ultimately, in the destruction of the very animals I was trying to help.

John Wootters is a semi-retired outdoors writer with more than 30 years experience. He was editor of Petersen's Hunting magazine and author of the monthly column "Buck Sense" and has written the all-time best selling book on deer hunting, "Hunting Trophy Deer." He has served on the Board of Directors of the National Rifle Association, and written for Shooting Times, Rifle, Handloader, Guns & Ammo and Petersen's Hunting magazines.