

Love to Journal. Jan. 3 1945
3 Negatives

PROCYON LOTOR, THE WASHER

Racoon

by

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Photo by VFF

Spring is not far away, and that means coon time. Some time ago, meeting Mrs. Harold Dekum Gill at a tea, the sight of me must have brought up the thought of the out-of-doors, wild places and wild creatures, and all of our meanderings by land and water and the queer company we kept. She gave me an interesting description of a family of coons that had been in the habit of bringing their young ones down the hill in the woods on her place in spring time. The little coons with their cute faces, eager and excited, scampering about, learning to hunt under the leaves, venturing up near the house, was an unusual sight in the middle of a big city. Spring has passed several times since then, but we hope the canny coons still keep their tryst for a handout from the Gills.

Procyon lotor wakes up anywhere after January in a cold climate, but in a mild and gentle region like western Oregon, he may not crawl into a den winter, and go to sleep at all so he may be already up and prowling about in the wet, messy woods hunting for grubs, snails, salamanders, and especially frogs on which he dotes. But first and very important on this fresh spring morning, he has the urge for a mate and is in a pugnacious frame of mind, even to his own blood brothers, until he has captured what he is after. No one knows whether he is a good family man, or a wandering Willie, pretending to be a bachelor or a misunderstood husband, but we have our suspicions. He is always so foot loose and casual, and for that matter not hysterical like some wild folk at sudden meetings. Altogether, he is a self-contained, wily individual sufficient unto his own needs.

Somewhere in a snug, warm hollow in an old tree, or perhaps in a safe cave up a hillside, from two to five quarter pound, naked, squirming mites of flesh have their beginnings in mild, drippy April - or thereabouts. These first days are blind and almost inanimate, just waiting for time to do its work, then feeling, wriggling and sucking. They gradually awake to each

others' warm bodies, their mother's soft hair, and they begin to whimper and crowd for places at the table. Soon they sense light and use their feet to crawl about. And soon they are nibbling at raw flesh that their mother brings in. And they begin to use their little hands to crawl up to the door and feel the balmy air and sunshine. It isn't long until they are cute coon children with chunky bodies, pointed noses, erect ears, faces crossed by black masks, little hands with naked soles, and round bushy tails circled with black rings - all in all a neat dress pattern. And they are slowly acquiring all the coonness of their parents, and are ready to go out in the world and try their hands at hunting and hiding, playing and feasting.

Their mother soon leads them down to the little stream, for it is always water for the coon tribe, and they are born and live near it. The small, clear stream trickling down through the woods becomes their playground, their hunting ground, and their table where they eat. Here they romp, wrestle, and wrangle, and grow bold and mischievous, even quarrelsome. It is noticeable that their feet are never still, always feeling for something. With eyes roaming up into the tree-tops, these agile hands will be feeling about on the ground, patting a lump of earth as if there is something hidden in it. If there happens to be a beetle or a worm, it is dragged out and promptly taken down to the water, dunked and sozzled and mauled into a limp rag. As if that isn't enough, they roll it in mud again, and finally swallow it at a gulp as if it has been transformed into a choice morsel. They are not particular about what they eat, for they are about as omnivorous as bears, taking any kind of meat or small game they can capture or find dead. Mostly their menu consists of frogs, small fish, crayfish, clams, mussels, berries and other fruits, nuts, and of course corn green or ripe. In autumn they fatten on nuts and grain, getting ready for long cold days and nights and lean pickings- or perhaps a long sleep using up their stored fat.

When their mother drags a crayfish or a frog from the muddy bank of the stream, it is promptly fought over, grabbed by a lucky one and forthwith dragged back to the water again and sozzled and washed. As if that

isn't enough, little fingers feel and probe around and bring up some more mud which is plastered on the limp creature, and the washing is done all over again. Think of washing a poor fish that has never been out of water since it was hatched!

I once watched a pet coon reach cautiously down and pull a frog out of the ooze, in the bottom of an old tub, for there was always mud in it. As slippery as it was, it couldn't escape those nimble fingers that clutched it. Back into the water it had to go. It must be washed, and washed it was with a vim. Then he grabbed it in his mouth and began to swing and sway, dancing around like a cannibal in a delerium, his long, serious face solemn. Frogs didn't grow in his back yard, and this was an especial treat. What a limp, gooey mass it was before he finally swallowed it. It reminded me of a cat torturing a mouse before it was downed.

On rare occasions raccoons have been known to catch poultry, especially when these roost in trees, and they undoubtedly catch small game and eat the eggs of waterfowl found nesting in marshes and along lake shores. They eat some fruit and also destroy some corn while in the roasting ear stage, or even when ripe, but these depredations are usually overlooked in view of their general value as game and fur-bearing animals. In many places the nocturnal "coon hunt" with dogs is an exciting sport.

The fur value of the raccoon is not great, the prices reaching usually but a few dollars a skin, but because of their general abundance and wide distribution, they form an important part of the animal fur crop of Oregon. The fur is attractive, warm, and very durable. It was formerly much used in winter coats for both men and women. In the cold eastern regions, it is still popular for winter travel by motor.

No, *Procyon lotor* - *Procyon*, the washer - can no more change his habits than the leopard can his spots. He will still be washing his crayfish till the end of his days.