



Local Nature

by Eric Dinerstein

Wash-bears



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A raccoon rinsing a meal of freshwater clams from the Cabin John Creek.

The descriptors “charming,” and “quaint” rarely come to mind when describing German nouns. Yet one must make a clear exception for their word for raccoon—*Waschbär* (pronounced *wash-bear*)—a North American species that prowls Cabin John backyards to

visit bird feeders, birdbaths, and compost boxes. Even rough-and-tumble Russian has its own lovely appellation, “*poloskun*” (meaning “rinsers”). My favorite though is the Italian moniker, *orsetto lavatore*. Wild animals inspire whimsy.

The North American raccoon, which ranges naturally from Canada to Panama and formerly throughout the Caribbean, was introduced from the U.S. to the European countries of France, Germany, and Italy; to Russia in the mid-1930s; to the Caucasus region; and to Japan, the latter after a successful cartoon series in 1977 brought widespread popularity.

This charismatic exotic species, with its black mask, inquisitive nature, documented high intelligence (for a wild mammal), and beyond-cute pups called kits, is a favorite of children around the world. While quirky in their own right, the foreign names get two critical issues wrong about raccoons.

First, raccoons are not in the bear family, but instead belong to a family called the *Procyonidae*, which also contains the comical *coati mundis*, handsome ringtails, and prehensile-tailed kinkajous of the tropics. They are the largest members of this family: robust raccoons in the wild have reached nearly 60 pounds, but hardly qualify for the bear category. But they do, like bears, belong to the order *Carnivora*. Yet here again, raccoons, as a species, are exceptional in the *Carnivora*, being one of the most omnivorous mammals in the world, with a diet of 40% invertebrates (e.g., insects, crayfish, and shellfish), 30% or more vegetable matter, and the rest vertebrates. The percentages can vary seasonally; for example, in October, the raccoons visiting our backyard in Cabin John seem to have fattened themselves on compost and a rain of wild persimmon fruits (judging from their ruckus at night).

Scientists are by nature dispellers of myths, and here is the second aspect of raccoons that those foreign names get wrong, no matter how appealing the image is to the imagination: technically, raccoons do not wash their hands before they eat. They do, however, feed heavily on freshwater invertebrates such as clams, mussels, crayfish, fish, and worms. Perhaps to have a better sense of what they are eating or to clean off sand that could wear down the enamel on their teeth, raccoons do rub their vibrissae-filled front paws over the food item. They are not known to take food items that are captured on land—an oak acorn, a corn ear, a

mouse, a lizard—and douse it under water before they eat it. Some captive raccoons do this, but the behavior has not been observed in nature.

It is almost a tenet in ecology that any creature that is omnivorous should have the widest ranges, and raccoon behavior certainly qualifies. Think of opossums, black bears, the original range of grizzlies or, among birds, the range of robins or crows. The northern limit of the raccoon in Canada may be a result of the inability of this species to undergo hibernation. But why raccoons have not spread in modern times throughout South America remains a mystery.

Every student of nature has a favorite raccoon story, so here is mine. When I was a graduate student studying tropical fruits bats in Costa Rica in the early 1980s, I rented a small cabin adjacent to a banana grove and near the rainforest where I was working. I used the banana grove to provision captured fruit bats of various species I would study while conducting fruit-choice experiments, before releasing them a few days later back into the wild. To make sure the fruit bats were bulked up for their departure, I gave them meals of fresh bananas, a favorite, on their last night dining chez Dinerstein. Costa Ricans typically would cut a giant raceme, or stems, from a banana plant and leave the massive structure, lined with slightly unripe bananas embedded in the stem, hanging by a rope from the roof of a shed. As the raceme ripened you pulled bananas off and ate them. Two neighboring raccoons discovered my banana shed, and one of them cleverly opened the makeshift wire lock I had created to secure the shed from nosy neighbors. I opened the shed to fetch some ripe bananas and saw two stripped stems. There must have been 100 bananas that had disappeared over the few days since I had last visited the shed. Then I heard some sniveling and sprawled out on the flat roof of the shed were two inflated raccoons, stuffed with my bananas.

They were too full to flee. “So, you thieves!” I scolded them. They didn’t, or couldn’t budge. Finally, I gestured towards them and they jumped off the roof and landed with a thud eight feet below and waddled off.

There were plenty more bananas where those came from, so I wasn’t too concerned. But in Japan, introduced raccoons, first released in 1977, have now spread to every prefecture in the country and are responsible for considerable crop damage. A lesson here: no matter how charming the animal,

releasing them into a country where there are no natural checks and balances brings to mind the critical warning in all animal introductions: be careful what you wish for.

I can’t grow bananas in my backyard, but I have, for the first time in seven years, harvested a crop of 14 pawpaw fruits. This bounty is from two trees I’ve carefully nurtured since the seedling stage. Before I could harvest my whole crop, raccoons ran off with half. I hope they enjoyed them as much as I did. —