

Three Raccoons Go Wild In Town

By Randall L. Eaton, Ph.D.

When I was ten the Bellrose family acquired a baby raccoon. Ricky accompanied the Bellroses and Eatons on their weekend outings to the wildlife research station on Quiver Creek, where we canoed and picnicked. He was by far the most enjoyable wild pet any of us had known. Not only were Ricky's antics hilarious, he was forever mischievous, working his nimble fingers and hands in every crook and cranny imaginable. One day he'd dismantle the distributor wires on the Bellrose's Oldsmobile, the next he'd redistribute the contents of the kitchen cupboards, leaving no container unturned.

While bulldozing trees on the Sangamon farm, my uncle Marvin discovered a litter of infant raccoons in the cavity of a felled tree. Having made it clear to him that my acquisition of a raccoon was of utmost importance, he delivered a handful of tiny raccoons—soon we called them "coonbugs." Only one of the four survived the first week despite my round-the clock efforts to feed and nurture them.

Susie was about four weeks old when someone else delivered a slightly larger raccoon collected in a similar tree felling incident. I reckoned that he was about six weeks old, and in any case, like Susie, Elmer adapted quickly to the doll bottle and being handled. Susie and Elmer shared the sleeping porch off my upstairs bedroom. Throughout the evening, about every two or three hours, they began whimpering, squeaking and wailing in that order until I came with the milk bottle. While I was at school, my mother fed them, and I came home at noon to feed them. They grew fast and were healthy.

When Elmer and Susie had been part of the Eaton family's menagerie of wayward wildlife for two months, I received a phone call from my uncle John. There was a sick raccoon behind the Eaton Ford Garage, and John thought I might want it. When I arrived on the scene about a dozen neighborhood people were standing around in the hot summer sun gawking at the poor animal as it growled feebly, too weak to stand or flee. About four months old, it was infested with ticks and fleas. Never before or since have I seen an animal so plagued by external parasites. Numbering in the thousands, the fleas moved in waves over the animal, the onlookers said he'd better be put out of his misery. When they saw me get out my heavy leather work-gloves, several were aghast that I would touch him with all those fleas and ticks. But he was close to death, and I was too much in love with raccoons to turn away so I picked him up by the nape of the neck, put him in a burlap bag, set the bag in the basket of my bicycle and rode home as fast as possible.

At home, I showered the raccoon with flea powder, and the fleas swarmed off his body in all directions. Still too weak to stand, he let me feed him warm milk and eggs with a spoon, and by evening he began to lap food from a bowl while lying on his side. As his strength returned, he showed every sign of being wild— growling and snapping at me when I brought food. But within three days, he became tamer, and I could handle him a little. John, I called him, was well beyond the age of taming when I rescued him, and though he was never as receptive to handling as Elmer or Susie, he did allow me to pick him up and pet him.

The raccoons soon became a tight-knit group, with John always in the lead followed by Elmer and then Susie in the order of their size and age. When I went into the backyard

and called them by trilling—imitating their calls—they ambled to me all in a row. Often, little Susie would miss a sharp turn around a bush or tree trunk and have to scramble frantically to catch up with Elmer and John, who were much faster.

John and Elmer climbed trees readily, but Susie was reluctant or unable to follow them up. Perhaps John and Elmer already had been coaxed into climbing by their mothers, but Susie had been captured too young. I delighted in playing with her, letting her crawl on top of my head and hold herself there with all four feet as she licked my head, trilled and whistled. I could walk a long way before she wanted down to my shoulders. She was especially fond of sucking fingers. I demonstrated this to friends and family by setting her down and then offering her my small finger as a substitute nipple. With her suction-like mouth and tongue, she fastened onto it while I raised my hand until she was dangling from my finger, her limbs protruding straight out to her side. Sucking in earnest, she clung to my finger solely with the aid of her mouth.

The raccoons accompanied me on many adventures, from driving to the local rootbeer stand to explorations of the countryside. Having two raccoons, perched on your head, squabbling over their choice place to perch, isn't the safest way to drive. Outside the car, they followed along through woods and pastures. At creeks and ponds their natural instincts emerged as they worked their paws back and forth under water searching for shellfish and anything edible.

As September approached I began to let them spend more and more time roaming the neighborhood, exploring trees and garbage sites in the alley. I would be leaving for college and feared that they would be too young and too ignorant to know how to feed and protect themselves in the wild. I figured that the best solution was to release them in town, the environment they knew best. A week before I departed, I let them go completely free while I was still around to look after them and provide food if they needed it. I alerted all the neighbors so they'd be aware that any mischief from the hands of raccoons, such as strewn garbage, was likely to be the handiwork of John, Elmer and Susie. Since everyone was fond of the raccoons, I hoped that, if anything, they would receive handouts and generally be tolerated. My parents promised that they would set out food for them in the shed behind the house, where dogs couldn't reach it.

The raccoons took to the huge maple tree in front of the house next door. They made their home in a natural cavity fifty feet high where a limb had broken off in a wind storm. The first couple of days the raccoons remained on human schedule, active by day, sleeping by night, and by the end of their first week of living wild in town, they had changed their schedule to that of wild raccoons—active by night, sleeping by day. My trill calls were ignored until it was almost dusk when they'd scamper down the tree for affection and treats. The night before I left, they didn't come down at dusk, and I hoped they were there in the cavity waiting for darkness.

After two weeks at college, I returned home, mostly to investigate the well being of the raccoons. As soon as I was dropped off in front of the house I stood below the maple and trilled. The raccoons answered and came scurrying down the loose-barked trunk. This time little Susie was in the lead, Elmer was second and the wilder John came slowly last. She ran straight to me, climbed up my body to the top of my head and hugged my face with her paws while licking me feverishly. It was a happy reunion, and I didn't mind that John and Elmer stayed back since I hoped that they would come to avoid people and keep Susie out of harm's way.

Never again did they answer my calls, and only twice over the succeeding months did I as much as glimpse them. Both times, it was late at night in the car's headlamps as I

drove down the block to my parents' house. They had gone wild in town, raiding garbage cans, stealing dog and cat food, and taking whatever Toby Butt, the neighbor, or my folks put out for them.

Because Toby was, like me, an early riser, always tending his lawn, garden or chickens, he was my source of information about the raccoons' life. At dawn he often saw them crossing Plum Street or raiding cans in the alley. The three raccoons survived there on South Plum for at least six months. On a few evenings in my bedroom I could hear the faint trill of raccoons, and though I always went out to answer them, they had more important chores than rekindling old friendships.