

A Short Story

NIGHT BANDITS

AGE 7 TO 12



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Night Bandits

I had just snapped off the kitchen light. The sudden crash and bang was loud and startling. I nearly jumped out of my skin. Then I jumped for the switch to turn on the backyard spotlight. Robbers? An escaped lion from a circus?

“*What* was that?”

“Dad, I don’t know.”

My father cranked open the window over the sink and we both cautiously peered out. And peering right back at us from inside of the garbage can was a raccoon. Its eyes sparkled against the distinctive black mask. The animal wasn’t frightened at all, but just seemed to grin at us.

“That’s a big one! Biggest I’ve ever seen,” my dad said.

“How big is he?” I asked.

“Must be close to thirty pounds. Maybe more. The average is about fifteen pounds, so you can see he is one big fellow.”

By this time the raccoon had climbed out of the can, dragging scraps of food with him.

“Probably will take that back to his mate. Yes. See, there she is at the edge of the woods.”

“Is it true that they wash their food before eating it?”

“That’s a curious habit. I don’t know why they do it, but it’s not done for cleanliness. I’ve seen a raccoon wash a fish it had just caught in a stream and the fish was already as clean as a fish can be. However, when water is not available, the animal will even wash its food in dirt. Strange isn’t it?”

“Yes, but how did you know that?”

“Follow me,” Dad said.

Soon Dad was mumbling, “raccoon, raccoon,” as he flipped the pages of a book about wild animals. “Here it is. You read it,” he said as he handed the book to me.

“The raccoon is found over most of the U.S., and makes its home in hollow logs or trees. Usually it feeds at night on frogs, fish, lizards, snakes, shellfish, insects, birds and acorns. It will eat almost anything that is edible. There’s more, but it doesn’t explain the animals’ habit of washing its food.”

“Perhaps you can find a book at the library or online that will tell us.”

“That’s a good idea. Maybe tomorrow after school I can do that. I’d really like to know.”

“I’m surprised the information isn’t in this book.”

“It says here at the end that the raccoon is closely related to a number of other animals living in different parts of the world.”

“Why don’t you look them up?”

“Ok. This first one I’ve never even heard of before. It’s a Cacomistle. Let’s see, common to the southwestern U.S. and Mexico, it’s known by many names: Bassarisk, Cacomixl, Civet-cat, Ringtail and Ringtail-cat. It has gray-brown fur and at about thirty-two inches long, more than half of that is a white ringed tail. A fierce hunter of mice and rats, it also eats birds, insects and other small animals. Kind of cute, isn’t it?”

“Cute? It’s almost grotesque!”

“No, no - - you’re looking at the Coati-Mundi. This strange looking animal ranges from Mexico to Paraguay and is the most mischievous of the raccoon family. Says here it’s about the size of a cat and makes a good pet. However, it is so incredibly curious that it can quickly tear a house apart just exploring.”

“Now this one really is cute. What is it?”

“The gentle and friendly Kinkajou or ‘honey bear’. Kinkajou, I like the sound of that. Not a bear, but belonging to the raccoon family, it lives in Mexico,

Central and South America. Large as a cat, but longer, the Kinkajou has soft, short yellow-brown fur. The legs are short and the prehensile tail very long.

What's prehensile?"

"They can curl their tail around something, like a tree branch, and hold on."

My Dad knows *everything!*

"Hey, I thought the Giant Panda was a bear. See, the book claims it is more closely related to the raccoons."

My Dad *doesn't* know everything.

"Oh, they show a Lesser Panda. Except for its color, it looks a lot more like a raccoon. The Chinese name is 'Fire-cat' because unlike the black and white of the Giant, the Lesser Panda is a bright rust red. Although both live high up in the mountains of western China, the Lesser is much more common. The Giant can weigh three hundred pounds or more; however, the Lesser Panda is just a little larger than a big cat. In fact, in many ways it is like a cat; it climbs easily and quickly with long, sharp, curved claws; hisses and spits when angry; curls up to sleep. Unlike the Giant Panda, who eats only bamboo leaves and stems, the Lesser eats fruits, roots, nuts and eggs."

"Interesting how those animals are all related, yet are all so different. Well, I think we better check on our own raccoons," Dad said.

"They're gone!"

"Yes and will you look at the mess!"

“Now that they know there’s food here, I bet they’ll come back all the time. We can watch them - - maybe they’ll get tame enough so I can hand-feed them.”

“I don’t think that’s such a good idea.”

“Why Dad?”

“Because they are wild animals. They should stay wild and not depend on handouts from us; besides, look at the backyard. Do you want to clean up that mess every night?”

“Me? I have to clean it up?”

“You guessed it.”

“Now that I think about it, I’m sure you’re right. They need to stay wild. And Dad, do you think we can get some kind of locks for the garbage cans? - - Please?”

Do raccoons really wash their food? See the next page to find out.

“Raccoons are highly intelligent and curious creatures, and these qualities have helped raccoons thrive in both wild and urban habitats. This intelligence and curiosity combined with a pair of highly dexterous hands also means that raccoons cause a lot of mischief in their search for food, and often find ways into houses, campers and coolers. The occasional banditry aside, the hands of a raccoon are incredible appendages and shape how raccoons interact with the world. The hands of a raccoon have many times more touch receptors than their feet and a lot of the processing space in a raccoon brain is dedicated to their hands. They often use their hands to “see” in situations like foraging underwater, feeling under overhangs, and moving in the dark.

The fact that raccoons use their hands as both tools and as one of their most important sense organs has led to the myth that raccoons wash their food. Raccoons in captivity have been observed “washing” their food, which is actually repeated dipping and rolling of food items in water. This behavior has led to a widespread belief that raccoons wash their food before eating or that they need to soften their food. This behavior is not really washing and food preparation but an outlet for a raccoon’s constant need to use their hands to sense the world and look for food. In the wild raccoons are constantly dabbling in water and searching in nooks and crannies, and in the captivity this behavior finds an outlet in food “washing”. Some biologists have described the behavior more as feeling than washing, and this description is supported by the fact that raccoons often rub and roll their food even in dry enclosures and rub their hands together even when they are not holding anything.

The food washing myth has persisted because in the wild raccoons are constantly foraging in water and rolling and handling their prey, which often looks like they are washing their food. Raccoons do not have a very good grip because of the lack of opposable thumbs, and so they often hold items with two hands and frequently roll objects between their hands. If this behavior happens near water it also looks like washing.

The truth is that raccoons in the wild do not really wash their food in any way that we as humans think of washing. They constantly forage in the water and will often roll food items in their hands, but they are actually looking for food and working to get it into their mouth with much less concern about how clean it may be.”

Elbroch, Mark and Kurt Rinehart. *Behavior of North American Mammals*. New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2011