

## RACCOONS KEEP ANIMAL CONTROL BUSY

# Spring Cleaning May Include Battle With Intruders

BY TERRY POPE

When property owners return to their Brunswick County beach homes in the spring, they often come face to face with unwelcome intruders—raccoons.

Sometimes residents may not know the animals are there until they hear strange noises in their homes at night.

"Raccoons can do a lot of damage to their homes," said Robert Grissett, Brunswick County Animal Control officer. "It's real frightening

when people hear movement in their walls."

Raccoons are noted by their gray bodies, blackened eyes and bushy, ringed tails. They feed on small animals, fruits and nuts and live mostly in trees.

But in the winter months, when many island cottages are vacant, raccoons seek shelter in the homes for warmth and a place to raise their young. They can climb through the smallest opening to settle in attics, crawl spaces or heat vents.

It is usually a shock for the prop-

erty owner. Often, they have no idea such wild animals exist on the islands.

"They come down for their vacation in the summer," said Dee Lee, Brunswick County Animal Control clerk, "and they've got a new addition to the family."

Brunswick County Animal Control officers will set traps to help catch the animals. Property owners are not advised to try catching raccoons on their own.

Sometimes an animal's willingness to invade a man's home could

be a sign that they may be sick with distemper or rabies, said Grissett.

If property owners see the animals out in their yards, especially during the day, they should not approach them, he said. Raccoons are nocturnal animals and mostly come out at night.

"It could be carrying rabies," said Grissett. "All of the ones that have shown the symptoms, we've taken to be tested."

So far, rabies has not been found in Brunswick County. Persons should still have all pets vaccinated against the disease.

Usually, the raccoons are simply seeking shelter from the cold and a safe place to have babies. The adjacent island marshland is a perfect breeding ground for animals, particularly raccoons, said Grissett.

April is usually animal control's busiest month for phone calls from surprised property owners along the Brunswick County beaches. But the only way to catch the animals is by setting traps, said Grissett, which may take patience and time. Often, an opossum may be caught instead.

Opossums have also been known to inhabit beach cottages for the same reason, to keep warm. They are white animals with a narrow tail and are marsupials, which means they carry their young in a pouch on the abdomen.

Another sign that raccoons are

about is overturned trash containers. Grissett said some varieties of raccoons found on Holden Beach have weighed up to 25 pounds.

In one case last year, a Holden Beach property owner boarded up a hole where he thought a raccoon was entering his home. The next day, the board had been removed.

"Some of them are very strong animals," said Grissett. "We later found out that she had babies in the house, and she was determined to get back inside."

Captured raccoons are taken to the animal shelter in Supply for observation, to determine if they are healthy, said Ms. Lee. Children should be told to avoid touching the animals if they are spotted near a home.

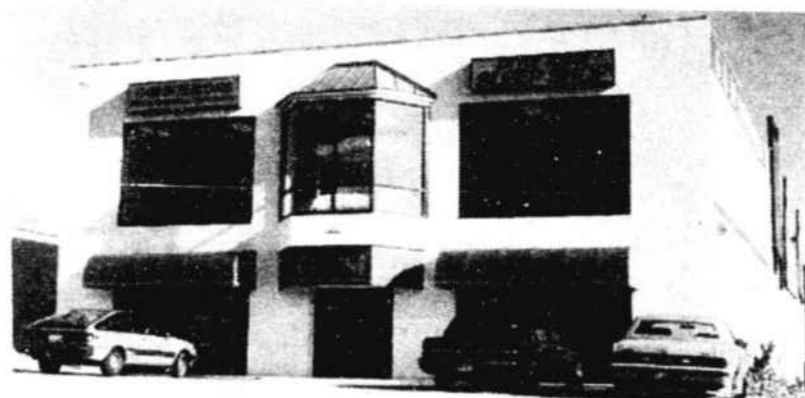
"To a kid, they'll think that it's just a friendly animal," said Ms. Lee.

If the animals show no signs of sickness, they are released into the woods outside of the animal shelter, to return to their natural habitat once again. The shelter is not close to any homes on N.C. 211 at Supply.

Officers say, in the past, they have received the most raccoon complaints from Oak Island and Holden Beach. They have also been called to remove squirrels and snakes from homes. A local exterminator is called to remove the snakes, said Ms. Lee.

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