



## Winter Hunger Pangs

**The official first day of winter falls on December 21, still several weeks away as I write this, but you would never know it from our weather here in western Washington.**

*Cherie Langlois*

Wednesday, December 9, 2009

Photo by Kelsey Langlois The official first day of winter falls on December 21, still several weeks away as I write this, but you would never know it from our weather here in western Washington.

Instead of somber clouds and rain, we have glacier-blue sky and crisp sunshine this morning. Last night, the temperature plummeted to 18 degrees (here that's c..c..cold), turning water buckets to ice buckets, frosting the trees and making our hungry wild neighbors even hungrier.

Several nights ago, one or more clever raccoons snagged and partially ate two chickens through the wire of their pen. Last evening, chaos erupted during tuck-in time (our birds free-range by day)—not surprisingly, the remaining ducks and chickens were reluctant to enter their pens after the attack.

In the confusion and fading light, my special Muscovy duck friend, seven-year-old Velma, remained outside without our knowing it. From the looks of it, the raccoons killed her as she slept on the pen roof.

I'm not sharing this in order to ignite hatred of raccoons (or other wild predators), but as a cautionary tale. Yes, I feel sad and frustrated, as well as angry at myself for allowing this to happen.

I don't feel too pleased with Mr. or Ms. Raccoon and family right now either; however, I'm not out for their blood. As a former zoo keeper who worked closely with raccoons, cougars, wolves, and other maligned predators, I can't help but respect and like these fascinating animals.

Raccoons are extremely adaptable, smart, and often very bold. Talented climbers and good swimmers, these dexterous, mostly nocturnal omnivores dine on pretty much anything they can get: crayfish, insects, fish, berries, grains, carrion, eggs, baby mice, cat food, and more.

They possess an insatiable curiosity; we've had individuals—adorable babies to adults—climb up on our Adirondack chairs to peer in the living room windows, often coming nose-to-nose with our excited Coonhound mix, Pippin. This collection of attributes has helped raccoons flourish from Canada to Central America, but it also brings them into conflict with humans.

I can't blame these masked bandits for doing what they must do to survive, but I can take steps this winter to prevent them from surviving on my ducks and chickens—and so can you: Tuck your birds into secure enclosures during the night, when many predators are most active.

Check coops/pens regularly for holes, gaps and weakened/rusted wire where intruders can enter or reach through (we're currently beefing up our pens with plywood and hardware cloth; the coons tore right through the old chicken wire). Don't leave food outside at night for pets, or purposely feed raccoons. Consider a trained livestock guardian animal for 24/7 security (many farmers swear by them).

~Cherie

« More Country Discovery »