



## The Desert Wild

Brooke Bessesen

Still considered relatively untamed land, Arizona's predominantly harsh desert terrain is host to a myriad of beautiful and interesting animals. *The Desert Wild*, written by nature enthusiast, Brooke Bessesen, offers visitors and residents a special look at the state's native fauna. Each column takes readers on a journey of discovery as Brooke shares unique insight and fascinating facts about an important southwest species.



### Snoodleberries

Snoodleberries. That's what I called them. I realize this nickname was not really appropriate for a grown woman to use in the serious world of wildlife biology, but it was often the first word that came to mind when I saw adorable baby animals. And those three newborn raccoons were adorable - definitely snoodleberries!

The day I met them was a critical one. I was volunteering in the wildlife rehabilitation clinic when I found a note indicating the little snoodleberries needed to be bottle-fed. I warmed their milk, drew some up in a syringe (it makes a perfect little bottle) and placed the nipple securely on the tip. When I opened the incubator, I heard their squeals as they wiggled about helplessly. Reaching over a large soft teddy bear who watched through wistful glass eyes, I scooped one tiny raccoon bundle into my hand. He fit nicely, the size of an overstuffed bratwurst, with eyes closed and four miniature legs flailing. A black mask was already developing across his face, which as an adult would reduce glare and help his night vision.

Raccoons are extremely adaptable animals, ranging throughout most habitats from Canada to Panama. The reason they do so well in varying environments is because they have only two significant requirements: food and water. Aside from drinking, water serves a rather unique purpose for raccoons. Since they don't produce a lot of saliva they must moisten their food before they eat it. This habit of "washing" their fare developed into a myth of cleanliness but is in fact a simple behavioral adaptation to help them swallow. As for food, almost anything will do. Raccoons are omnivores; they eat both meat and plant material. In the wild they dine on things like crawfish, insects, birds, berries and acorns, but in cities, raccoons also seem to hold dumpster-diving as a competitive sport, foraging through garbage cans for the likes of crusty old donuts and soggy pizza.

Raccoons are rarely seen because of their nocturnal lifestyle, but mischievous as they are, sometimes, after a few tumbled trash receptacles, they are pegged a problem. The mother of the baby raccoon I was holding was one such nuisance animal - she had been captured in a humane live trap and brought to our facility for relocation. Intake volunteers immediately noticed that she was lactating and sent rescue volunteers to find her babies, but despite their best efforts, it was a couple of days before they uncovered the infants in a nearby den. Weak and dehydrated, the young could not return to their mother right away and were hand fed instead.



I slipped the rubber nipple between the raccoon's tiny pink jaws. Offered the nutrition of a milk substitute, mammal babies are often reluctant to suckle in earnest, sometimes rejecting food completely. Eventually he gave in to starvation and ate, and I felt my heart go all gooey at the sight of him; there is something so sweet about infants, human or animal, when they suckle milk, later cooing with full bellies and sleepy eyes.

By late afternoon, the squirming babes seemed much stronger. Nearby in the hospital, the mother raccoon, her black face disappearing in the shadows of a large carrier, made low twittering sounds as she waited. We put the threesome in a shallow container, placed it on the floor where Mom could see and hear them, and tossed the blanket they had been sleeping on in for her to smell. She immediately showed an interest in both their scent and sounds. After a short while, opening her carrier door, we scooted the babies closer and Mother Raccoon didn't miss a beat. Warily, she crept to the front of her carrier and with agile hands, carefully lifted one infant from the container. Raccoons have such nimble fingers and wonderful dexterity that soon all of them were in her custody and she was nurturing them with gentle licks.



Within only a few days, the four youngsters were moved to a quiet outdoor enclosure where they grew rapidly day by day. I sometimes peeked in to watch them eating in their water tubs, playing with bits of food, dipping them under the surface like children with toys in a bubble bath. Eventually, it was time for them to be released and they were taken to the river where I imagined them frolicking among long grasses beside the shore, pressing their footprints into dark sticky mud and catching plump slime-covered frogs.

The following week, when I arrived at the clinic and peered into the incubator, a baby beaver met my gaze. His petite face, curious eyes and already prominent bucked teeth gave my heartstrings a powerful yank. Oh my, another adorable baby animal... snoodleberry!