

AREA NEWS

Raccoons make themselves at home at Greenwich Point

By Lisa Chamoff
STAFF WRITER

GREENWICH — John Bartlik Jr. called the masked creatures that paw through the trash cans near his Greenwich Point concession stand “raccoons with an attitude.”

The animals have become as much of a fixture of the 147-acre waterfront park as sunbathers, joggers and picnickers.

“They’ll go right into the garbage cans, and you shoot them away. And they come back,” said Bartlik, who runs Johnnie’s Tods Point Grill.

Daytime raccoon sightings at Greenwich Point have become common, with the town receiving calls recently from visitors concerned that the traditionally nocturnal animals have rabies.

But wildlife experts say that as raccoons get used to humans — and their food — they’re more likely to show themselves in daylight.

“Just simply the fact that an animal is out during the daytime doesn’t automatically mean it is not well,” said Ted Gilman, a senior naturalist at Audubon Greenwich.

Chris Vann, a wildlife biologist with the state Department of Environmental Protection, said daytime raccoon sightings are generally a spring phenomenon, with mother raccoons seeking more food for their young than they can get Dumpster-diving at night.

“The breeding families, because of the demands placed on their nutritional needs, they may come out and take that extra effort to get that additional food,” Vann said.

On Tuesday, Old Greenwich resident Anne Kron was strolling with a friend in the park when they spotted a raccoon walking, a baby trailing behind her.

“No one was walking too close, but they didn’t seem bothered,” said Kron, 47.

Kron said she wasn’t wor-



HELEN NEAFSEV/STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

A raccoon checks the garbage cans for food last week at Greenwich Point.

ried that the raccoons might have rabies.

“I’ve seen a rabid raccoon before,” Kron said. The ones at the Point “are just so used to the people.”

People shouldn’t worry about the raccoons unless they look disoriented and are stumbling around, coughing or drooling, Vann said.

Still, it’s not an open invitation to share your leftover potato chips.

“We are concerned about overly habituated raccoons,” Vann said. “There are some cases where a raccoon . . . might scratch a screen door and come into a house and seek food. An animal that acts aggressive enough to chase you off a picnic table could pose a potential public safety threat.”

Town officials say the problem hasn’t gone that far.

“I’ve heard from time to time that there are some brave raccoons looking for scraps from folks,” said Michael Long, director of environmental services at the town’s Health Department. “As far as rabies goes, we just recommend that people don’t go near any wildlife.”

Greenwich resident Axel Campbell said he suggested to town officials that they look

into setting out packets with an oral rabies vaccine for raccoons at the park. He also contacted the state DEP.

“Even though there isn’t an immediate problem, it could arise,” Campbell said. “All these animals should be protected so we can protect the people.”

Vann said such a program is possible, but if a person or dog is bitten by a raccoon, they would still likely start treatment for rabies, and the animal would be killed.

“There would be no change in the rabies response protocol for an exposure,” Vann said.

People say they usually spot one or two raccoons during trips to the Point. Earlier this week, Melissa Weicker and her cousin Brooke were enjoying lunch at a picnic table when they saw a raccoon dart out of nearby rocks by the water and snap up a scattering of bread crumbs.

“Every time people would come by, it would go back in the rocks,” said Weicker, a 21-year-old Riverside resident, just home from Trinity College in Hartford.

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Power

The bell rang. I'm going to be first in line to the cafeteria! thought Roger.

The sound of slamming books being put away faded. Roger and the students around him became silent. His teacher, Mr. Singh, gave them his carved-out-of-stone look. It's the one time he has complete power over us, thought Roger. Let him have his moment!

Just then Mr. Singh barked, "Row one, line up." Roger wasn't in row one. Who cares? He thought. Leaping up, he darted in and out of the desks; sure no one was paying attention.

"Roger," yelled Mr. Singh, "What are you doing? Get back to your seat! Wait your turn!" The rest of the class snickered. He slinked back, sat, and slouched. "Now you can be last in line!" Mr. Singh added. This reaction delighted the class. If they snickered before, now they laughed. Trying to look as though it didn't bother him, Roger grinned back.

The class left in a hurry. Roger took his place at the end of the line. As he reached the door, he saw his class moving ahead. He thought, I'll stay behind—I didn't want lunch anyway—I'll like being in here all by myself. I better close the door.

Door closed, Roger looked around and felt like the king of the castle. Now I'm in charge, he thought. The classroom was under his command. Why, I could take anything I wanted, and nobody would know. The thought grew in him taking on a life of its own. I could do it. Sure I could. I've got to make sure nobody realizes I stayed behind, though.

Thinking no further, he explored the nearest desk. He had no particular item to look for, but his new sense of power seemed to drive him on. He searched a second, then a third desk; finally, in the fourth, Roger found something. This was Mo-Mo's desk. The seconds were ticking by, adding to a growing fear of being discovered and adding to the thrill of it. In her desk was a round metal box.

What's in this? Roger thought. Prying its red enameled cover open, he saw a shiny green and gold frog. It

was made of metal and just for a moment he felt his heart in his throat. It looked so real, like it could jump out at him. Its ruby eyes sparkled. He picked it up gingerly. It'll just fit in my pocket.

With one movement, the green and gold frog took its place in his jeans. In what seemed just one more movement, Roger returned the box and bolted out the door.

Lunch never tasted better. No one seemed to have missed him. He enjoyed talking with the boys at his table, more than usual. He felt special, carrying his secret trophy.

When he spoke, they listened. When he made a joke, they laughed. Jason said, "Boy, Roger, did you ever get Mr. Singh! He was real mad—the way you almost got ahead of the line!"

"Yeah," Roger answered. "I just felt like having fun." It felt good, too, he thought, until everybody laughed at me.

"You're funny!" the others chimed in.

Back in the classroom, the afternoon wore on. The little frog felt heavy in his pocket. He



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yearned to take the frog out and examine it. He pictured himself showing it to the boys at the lunch table. But it wasn't nearly as good a feeling as when Jason and the others had laughed and talked with him at lunch.

I can hear what they'd say. "Thief." Well, that one kid, Gary, might think it's cool that I stole it—but there wasn't anybody watching. What I did wasn't special. I could have taken anything. Big deal.

Suddenly the little frog was too heavy and Roger felt empty inside. He wished he'd never taken it. For the rest of the afternoon, he thought about getting

rid of the frog. I could throw it in the trash on the way home, nobody would know.

With a start, he heard the bell ring. Cradling the beautiful green and gold frog in his hand, Roger lined up, this time when his row was called. And this time laughing with the others, not being laughed at. As he passed Mo-Mo, he reached down to the floor as though picking something up. Turning to her, he said, "Hey, Mo-Mo, is this yours?" and placed the frog on her desk.

"Yes! Thanks, Roger! I'm so glad you found it . . ." her voice trailed off as she looked at him. Her head tilted to one side, and there was a question in her eyes.

Embarrassed and guilty, Roger felt his face go red. He forced himself to look into her eyes. "Yes, I'm glad I did too . . ." he heard himself say. Mo-Mo smiled at him. Had she guessed that he had stolen her frog in the first place?

NEWSPAPER ACTIVITIES:

1. Have you ever made a decision to do something that made you feel "powerful" but that you later regretted? Do you wish you could have made a different decision? In the future, if you were faced with the same decision, what would you do differently?
2. Look through the newspaper for an example of a person who made a decision that he/she later regretted. Why do you think this person did what he or she did? What could they have done differently?

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