



1<sup>st</sup> EUROPEAN RACCOON COLLOQUIUM

# BOOK OF ABSTRACTS

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# The emergence of raccoon in Flanders (Belgium)

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## Abstract

In the Region of Flanders (northern Belgium), raccoon is subject to a double ban on captive holding, both on the basis of animal welfare, as on the basis of invasive species policy. Still, these bans have not prevented raccoon from being increasingly sighted. New observations arise from new introductions, and from dispersal from adjacent regions (the Walloon Region and The Netherlands). Natural dispersal has become increasingly important over time, and is now considered the dominant pathway of entry.

Anecdotally, in 2021, a raccoon was intercepted as a stowaway on a ship sailing from Baltimore to Belgium. Similarly, a raccoon was found dead in a container ship entering from Houston in 2014. These findings illustrate that there still is a risk of primary introductions, too.

Specific surveillance for raccoon is lacking. However, the increase in opportunistic observations, particularly over the past decade, is believed to reflect a real increase. Worryingly, among the Union list species established in Flanders, raccoon now ranks 5th (out of 29) in terms of overlap among sighting locations and areas designated under the Habitats Directive: about one in two sightings since 2015 occurred in such areas.

Raccoon is included in a government-led management scheme that aims to rapidly remove any sighted specimen through trapping. From June 2021 to October '22, nineteen animals were caught (F. Thoelen, pers. comm.). There are no reports of animals shot by hunters (a reporting form exists, but is not mandatory).

Although Flanders generally hosts less suitable habitat for establishment as compared to e.g. Wallonia, there are plenty of opportunities for raccoon to expand its range and establish firmly. The rapid response actions may slow, but will not prevent, the species' spread. Concerns thus exist about future trends in population extent, ecological impacts, pathogen loads, human-raccoon conflicts, and prospects for effective management.