

**RACCOON
GANGS,
PIGEONS
GONE BAD,
& OTHER
ANIMAL
ADVENTURES**

TRISH ANN KONIECZNY



Bible translations quoted in this book can be found at end of the book.

Published in association with Books & Such Literary Management, 52 Mission Circle, Suite 122, PMB 170, Santa Rosa, CA 95409-5370, www.booksandsuch.com.

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Raccoon Gangs, Pigeons Gone Bad, and Other Animal Adventures

Copyright © 2022 by Trish Ann Konieczny

Published by Ten Peaks Press, an imprint of Harvest House Publishers

Eugene, Oregon 97408

ISBN 978-0-7369-8417-1 (pbk)

ISBN 978-0-7369-8418-8 (eBook)

Library of Congress Control Number: 2021937930

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Printed in the United States of America

21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 / VP / 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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A CRY IN THE NIGHT

You called out in distress, and I rescued you.

PSALM 81:7 HCSB



Something's crying outside, and it won't stop!" my husband, Michael, lamented late one evening. "I keep hearing it again and again. We ought to go out and find it."

So he did. A tiny raccoon kit with its eyes not yet open was letting us know it was not happy! Apparently, it had fallen quite some distance out of the monster cottonwood tree not far from our bedroom window, and its momma had not been down or around to rescue it yet. True to form, and because I'm supposedly the animal nut, Michael hauled this kit into the house and said to me, "What are *you* going to do with it?"

All curled up in the bottom of a five-gallon bucket, the little raccoon was emitting a noise that was echoing alarmingly around our heads. *Anything to stop that screeching*, I thought to myself. "Let's call a wildlife rehabilitator to find out what *we* should do with it," I said aloud.

We found a number online for someone who rescued wildlife in our county and gave her a call.

"Reunite it with its mother; that's the best thing for it," she said. "And here's how..."

She gave us detailed instructions that involved putting the kit outside in a loosely covered container under the tree so its mother could retrieve it during the night. She said trying to reunite babies with

mothers that way often worked well, and she was quite sure this small ringtail would be safely back in its raccoon family fold by morning.

We followed her instructions to the letter and went to bed. Figuring we'd done the best we could, I didn't think much more about it and drifted off to sleep. But Michael is a lighter sleeper than I am. Even the vibrating of our phones—the vibrating, mind you, not the ringing—can wake him out of a sound sleep. And the wild things around our neck of the woods make a lot of nighttime noise. An owl is always hooting, coyotes are howling, or some late-night critter is squeaking outside the window. So my husband is awakened a lot.

This particular night, however, Michael found one sound even more distracting than all the rest. About 5:30 in the morning, bleary-eyed, he nudged me. “I didn't sleep much at all. That raccoon baby is *still* crying! It's been crying *all* night! I'm going out to take a look.”

That's when he discovered that it was raining raccoons. Or technically, it was raining raccoon kits. Down in the brush beneath the old cottonwood, he kept finding tiny raccoons, one after the other, each squirming around desperately in search of its mother. After several minutes of wading through the underbrush, he had come upon four of them.

Again he brought the tiny raccoons into the house, all curled up in the bottom of the bucket, and asked me, true to form, “What are *you* going to do with all these babies now?”

If you've never heard a baby raccoon screeching, you've missed out on one of life's most pitiable experiences, not to mention one of life's loudest distractions. (Count your blessings.) *One baby screeching last night was pitiful enough, but four is unbearable!* I thought to myself. “We'll have to call the wildlife rehabilitator back to see what to do next,” I said aloud.

I went into another room, hoping to be able to hear myself think, and got on the phone. “I'm calling to give you a report on the raccoon kit from last night. We did exactly as you said and put it out in a loosely covered container so its mother could retrieve it during the night. She never came for it, and now three more babies have rained down from the tree. There are four in all, and one seems quite weak.”

“That's not good!” she said. “They're probably dehydrated. If Momma

had been there during the night, they'd have full bellies and be content. They wouldn't have been crawling around last night and falling out of the den. They were trying to find her, but apparently she has disappeared. You'd better bring them in to me."

So these four loud little fuzzy heads and I got into the car and traveled 45 minutes to the rehabber's house. Thankfully, the kits were mostly quiet on the way, either lulled to sleep or terrified by the car's noise and motion. It had been a long night for us all, and I was looking forward to getting the poor little things into the hands of an expert and traveling back to my own nest in peace.

Do or Die

"Oh my, yes, they're very dehydrated," this rehabilitation expert said, weighing and examining the tiny ring-tailed orphans on our arrival. "I don't know where their momma is, but these little ones have not been fed in quite a while. Why don't you help me get some electrolytes into them?"

"Great! I'd love to!" I didn't get to handle wildlife babies every day, and these baby raccoons were hugely appealing—at least when they weren't screeching.

The rehabber mixed up electrolyte bottles and showed me what to do. We each took a couple of babies and got some rehydrating liquid into their stomachs. In the process, I quizzed her about the work she did with wildlife. I saw a pail labeled "raccoon formula" sitting nearby and asked her the obvious question: "Where on earth do you get raccoon formula?"

"Oh, a lot of rehabilitators use wildlife milk formulas like this one from companies that specialize in making them. This formula is especially good. It's a milk replacer you can use from day one with tiny raccoons, and they do really well on it. I can buy good species-specific formulas for all the babies we get in. The protein and fat content of the mother's milk is different for every animal, and orphan wildlife babies do much better if they're given exactly the right formula for their species. You can try raising them on kitten milk replacer or puppy milk replacer, but those can end up causing a host of problems in the long run."

Who knew such a thing as raccoon formula and squirrel formula and fox formula and opossum formula existed? I certainly didn't—yet she had it all.

"This formula isn't cheap!" she went on. "Raccoon milk powder is 12 dollars a pound, and a pound doesn't last long at all with a litter of four. But it's worth it."

"Now that these four babies have something filling their tiny little tummies, what happens next with them?" I asked.

"Let me show you something," the rehabber said. She led me into another room that contained five good-sized wire dog crates. Each crate contained a single raccoon kit roving around inside it. Each kit was climbing up the side of its crate and grabbing things or rolling around and play-biting stuffed animals. Between the five of them in those individual crates, they were raising a ruckus that filled the whole room. They were bigger and more mobile than the babies I had brought in, but were still quite small.

"Why are they all separated?" I asked.

"Raccoons can carry distemper, among other things. It's highly contagious and deadly to them. They each have to be quarantined for two weeks if they come in as single babies. If they stay healthy during that time, they can then be put in together. It's really good for them to live with their own kind, but people mostly bring me rescued singles that have to go through quarantine first. This is all the room I have available for raccoons, and you can see that every crate is occupied. Right now, I'm full!"

"Okay, what about other rehabbers in the area?" I asked.

"There is one," she said, "but I know she's full too. And due to the diseases they carry, raccoons must be released within whatever Michigan county they're born in. So I'm sorry, but you'll have to take these four you found home with you. I can't keep them here. Either you'll have to try raising them yourself, or you'll have to take them to your vet and have them euthanized."

When it rains raccoons, it pours.

She gave me a minute or two to digest that unexpected and shocking news, and then she asked, "What do you want to do?"

I may be the animal nut, but I had Michael's reaction in mind when I tentatively and with much trepidation answered, "Okay, then, how do I keep them alive at home?"

"I'll give you the electrolytes and formula and all the help you need anytime you want to call me," she said. (Now that I think back on it, she said those words almost gleefully.) "And I can fill out paperwork for the state agency in charge of wildlife so you can do this legally. You can become registered as a sub-permittee—a bottle-feeder who helps me raise orphans under my wildlife rehabilitator license. Once they're weaned, you'll bring them back to me here for release, or we'll decide where else to release them."

And so it began...and it hasn't ended yet. But she wasn't quite done with me: "If you're going to give this a try, the first thing we'd better do is worm them. You have to worm them every two weeks and *never, never* miss doing it!" she stressed. "They carry raccoon roundworm, which isn't dangerous to them, but it's dangerous to *you*. People think raccoons carry rabies, but there hasn't been a rabid raccoon in Michigan for more than 20 years. It's the roundworms you have to worry about. They can migrate into the human brain."

Great, I thought, now I feel like worming myself! (Actually, I do worm myself now that I work with wildlife regularly, but I'll spare you that story right at the start.) Still, I took the four tiny kits home anyway, roundworms and all, along with a hefty supply of worming medicine and everything else necessary for a human to become their mother hen.

I walked through the door back home 45 minutes later, and in an odd reversal I handed my husband the bucketful of raccoons and said, "What are *we* going to do with these now?"

"Why on earth do you still have them?" he asked.

I told him the whole story about the rehabber's facility being full of raccoons and the other rehabber being full of raccoons and everyone in our whole county who worked with wildlife (all of three people) being full of raccoons. Then I told him our choices: It was do or die.

"We should have them euthanized," he said decisively.

Then he added, "How often do they need to be fed? What kind of

cage will they need? How will we tell them apart? Do you have to get up at night to feed them?” (Notice the *you*.)

He finished with, “Quick, you’d better mix up some bottles! I think they’re hungry.” (Notice the *you* again.)



Baby ringtail getting used to the bottle

The Calm Before the Storm

Truly, I didn’t object at all to the feeding and cleaning and care suddenly thrust upon my schedule by the addition of four furry babies to our household. I have always been an animal fan, although I might not go so far as to call myself a fanatic. (Others might, like my husband.) As usual with any animals, I found these four tiny creatures fascinating and wildly (pun intended) appealing.

Did you know, for instance, that tiny raccoons purr when their mother comes back to the nest and

nuzzles or licks them as they start to nurse? I had no idea they purred, or perhaps more accurately, churred, like that! As soon as I would begin to stroke a kit at feeding time, out of its throat would come this excited little sound that expressed how very happy it was to find “Momma” and how thrilled it was to start eating. Its whole body would vibrate with the effort. It didn’t take me long to get caught up in the excitement of mothering this foursome and start churring back.

But then I frequently find furry animals distracting, along with the birds of the air, the creatures of the sea, and anything with an exoskeleton or eight legs. Sometimes I have to work to stay focused on the things that really matter—or should really matter to me as a Christian and formerly a pastor’s wife—for example, human beings with human needs of spirit, soul, and body.

In my defense, I think Jesus found all creatures great and small

captivating too. When He spent 40 days in the desert, Scripture tells us “he was with the wild animals” (Mark 1:13 NIV). Animals are everywhere, yet they get a special mention for being around Jesus at that trying time in His life. They might not have been sitting in His lap—or they might have been. We don’t know. Yet I’m guessing that their nearness provided Him with some comfort and companionship, and I understand that. I want to be with the wild animals, too, for the same reasons. It certainly felt companionable to hold the fuzzy raccoon kits in my arms and feed them!

I often think that whenever animals were near Jesus, the feeling of companionship must have gone both ways. I believe the animals knew when they were in the presence of their Creator. Think about the scene on Palm Sunday: Jesus climbs on the back of a colt that has never been ridden before and then rides it through the middle of a cheering, boisterous crowd of people who are shouting “Hosanna in the highest!” at the top of their lungs (see Mark 11:1-10). It is highly unlikely that any of us could have stayed on that colt without the scene turning into quite a rodeo. To stay so calm and obliging, that colt must have known something about the One who was on his back and must have trusted Him completely. Matthew 21 tells us that Jesus made sure the colt’s mother was brought along, undoubtedly as a means of comforting the colt in such unusual surroundings. I am convinced that God greatly cares about and enjoys all His creatures, many of which have played such interesting parts in biblical history right from the start.

Likewise, I began enjoying the job of caring for these four orphan raccoons. At the early stage, all they did was eat (a lot) and go to the bathroom (a lot) and sleep (a lot)...and sleep (a lot)...and sleep (a lot). As long as their stomachs were full, they were content to stay put in a soft blanket nest, quiet and relaxed. They were still too young to do anything else, and I was too inexperienced to know what was coming. I didn’t quite realize that this peaceful stage wouldn’t last long. As we were about to find out, what started out as a little bit of a raccoon rain-storm would soon turn into some wild, wild weather! We were about to have four very active, furry tornadoes on our hands.

TODDLER TORNADOES

Suddenly, a powerful wind swept in from the wilderness.

JOB 1:19



My rescuer husband and I spent a couple of blissful weeks as new raccoon parents. The fun part was that raccoon orphans need a ton of tender, loving care, which helps bolster their will to live. Area rehabbers told us it was fine to give them all the TLC we wanted to at first, at least while they were still babies.

Everything got off to what seemed like a great start. It didn't even cost us much. The rehabilitator had given me plenty of that specialized raccoon formula worth its weight in gold, plenty of electrolyte mix for their first week, plenty of wormer, and plenty of instructions to get us started.

I soon became used to mixing bottles, which I'd never had to do as a human mom since I had nursed my own kids. Soon I got on a (barely) manageable schedule of feeding the babies every few hours. I even grew to like the smell of raccoon milk powder, and I still do. You probably would, too, if you smelled it. The odor is sweet, milky, and hearty at the same time. Getting the milk into the front end of the babies was quite satisfying.

The not-so-fun part was cleaning the babies up at the other end afterward, the way their wild momma would have. Many animal mothers stimulate their babies at the back end to help them urinate and defecate. That way, the moms can make sure all the waste is removed

from the nest (one way or the other), so their babies stay clean and the odor doesn't attract predators.

You don't want to know the messy details of how I tried to duplicate that process as a human wildlife mom. All you need to picture in your mind is that whatever liquid and/or solid poo came out, it came



This juvenile Gangster still wants a bottle

out quickly. Very quickly. Everywhere. Soon my goal was to become proficient at positioning each kit over a trash can lined with paper towels during the cleanup process. My hope was that my aim would be better than the kit's, but I never had been very good at hitting a target.

Practice makes perfect, however, and with multiple mouths to feed and multiple nether ends to clean up, I had no shortage of opportunities to aim for my goal. Besides, it simply had to be done. Many wild babies can't go to the bathroom on their own for days or even weeks, so if they are orphaned and their human rescuers feed them but don't take care of business at the other end, the bladder pressure and toxic effects build up so much inside the babies that they cannot survive. I would not have known that without some training from a rehabber.

What made me think that cleaning cages later on would be easier than cleaning back ends—I don't know, but suffice it to say that cleaning up poo in any form at any stage by any method is less than fun. That much I can now tell you from lots and lots of experience.

The Trouble with Toddlers

As the babies grew and became much more vocal (screechy) and much more mobile (16 grabby paws a minute), mothering four raccoon kits sometimes rivaled what I imagine it would be like to have four human toddlers around at once. I'm not sure how else to describe it. We have three children of our own, but they came one toddler at a time. Now that they are grown, married, and having children of their own, I've experienced what it is like to have half a dozen grandchildren around who all want Grandma's attention at once, and I love the welcome chaos. But even that doesn't rival the chaos of taking care of four toddler-aged raccoons. One minute they were tiny specks of fur sleeping softly and soundly in a warm nest all day; the next minute they were toddler tornadoes taking life by storm, and we were blindsided.

Yet parents still love their toddlers who are making trouble, and some even love toddler quadruplets. If only they weren't so cute (human or raccoon). I couldn't help feeling attached to these little bundles, especially when they were sweetly sleeping together in a ball of fluff, rare though it became for all four to be asleep at once. We even gave them names, which can be wise or unwise as a rehabber, depending on how well you can control your level of attachment. These four became Skeeter (short for "mosquito" as he was always grabbing something, including me, with his mouth), Sharky (because he went beyond grabbing, straight to nipping), Golden Boy (because he was lighter in color than the rest, almost a blonde raccoon), and Ducky (I don't remember why, but what an odd name, I now think).

If their names aren't clue enough, did I mention that all four of them were males? What are the odds? In a way, that worked in my favor. Boy raccoons go wild and usually leave for good, so it's not as if these would be underfoot forever. Girls go wild, but sometimes will return in subsequent spring seasons to show off their babies. That sounded somewhat appealing, but I wouldn't be having that pleasure out of this litter.

Each one of these guys was all boy! The weak among them got stronger, the small got bigger, and they grew and grew. After their eyes

opened and their coordination kicked in, their grabbing and climbing and running began in earnest. If you've never tried to open a cage door and do some necessary task while four juvenile raccoons make a beeline for the exit all at once, you've never really faced an animal challenge and prevailed. Come to think of it, I rarely prevailed myself. But I expended a lot of effort trying.

Nothing Straightforward About It

Let me digress and make a quick disclaimer before I tell any more of this tale. If you are a professional animal person yourself, maybe a biologist or state game officer or another rehabber, keep in mind as I describe this first time around that I was learning about working with wildlife. I was *in training*. I didn't do everything right, and I did a lot of things wrong that I wouldn't do again. I even got a fair amount of conflicting advice from rehabbing experts. I refined the process in the following seasons, dropped a lot of dumb things I had done at the start, and added a lot of important things I initially overlooked.

But this first time around I didn't do everything wrong, either, as evidenced by the woods camera out back (an outdoor camera that captures videos or stills of wildlife), which is still catching photos of what I believe are some of the raccoons from this first bunch in all their wildness, even as I write these pages a couple of years later. So be merciful as you read about my first attempts at raising orphan raccoon kits. It's not like rehabbing raccoons is all that easy or straightforward in the best of circumstances.

In fact, almost all the experts agree on one thing: Raccoons are far and away the hardest mammals to rehabilitate successfully—not so much in keeping them alive and healthy, but in keeping yourself sane and healthy in the process. The statistics certainly back that up. In my home state of Michigan, and no doubt in countless others, many licensed wildlife rehabilitators specialize in two things—taking in a certain favorite species, and *not* taking in raccoons.

If you look at online lists of rehabbers county by county, entry after entry will include the qualifier “*No raccoons.*” That has less to do with raccoons being an RVS—rabies vector species—and more

to do with their being what I call a DVS—delinquency vector species. As the saying among rehabbers goes, “You can do raccoons, or you can do everything else, but you can’t do both!” So I figure it must be worth something that I survived rehabbing a litter of four male raccoon kits all the way to release on my first attempt.

Despite the challenges the first time presented, rehabbing had its bonus features. For hours and hours, I could have watched this first litter wrestle with each other, squeal, shimmy up anything with their busy paws, and play with water of any sort (bowls, pans, drips, drops, anything the least bit wet). For hours and hours, I often did watch them. They were far more entertaining than television.

The Ringtail Gang

These four guys cooked up all sorts of mischief—raccoons aren’t called ring-tailed rascals for nothing. I couldn’t imagine it in my wildest dreams, but some people keep a raccoon for a pet. What would be left of a house? Besides being unpredictable (if not dangerous) when they mature, raccoons leave nothing untouched. You’ve heard the saying “What’s mine is mine, and what’s yours is mine”? I’m pretty sure a raccoon said it first. These guys were not all for one but each one for himself.

The kits always made a beeline for anything new they set their shiny little eyes on. They could never resist grabbing it, exploring it, tasting it, or chewing it up. And it seemed as if they had the longest reach of any animal on the planet. No matter how far away from their cage I set an item, one of them would manage to snag it, pull it between the bars, and start a full-scale riot over it. Especially if it was a set of keys—either real ones or toys. You’ve seen those little colored plastic key sets made for human babies? Baby raccoons *cannot* get enough of those, so it’s a good thing I rarely find a garage sale without a used plastic key set going cheap or free because the keys usually have teeth marks in them. Raccoon kits don’t care who has chewed what before them.

Soon I was calling these sweet babies—which were fast turning into juvenile delinquents—the Ringtail Gang for short. I meant it in a Mafia sort of way. It’s how they operated. They were quickly learning

how to employ every underhanded scheme the term *gangster* implies to get what they wanted or to do what they wanted. I've gained so much insight into the criminal mind from rehabbing raccoons!

Like any respectable mobsters, they certainly were extortionists. If they had something I wanted, or if they had planted themselves somewhere I didn't want them to be, I knew I would have to ante up with some pretty high-stakes payoffs to get any cooperation from them. Usually that involved something sweet or something shiny, or both.

Sometimes to preserve my sanity, I would shut them into our enclosed side porch while I cleaned their cage, just so I didn't have to wrestle with them. All four of them always wanted to be involved in every little cleaning task, dirtying everything all over again before I ever got anything clean. Or they all wanted *out* the cage door when I wanted them to stay *in*. To sidestep the daily rumble, I would float a few handfuls of grapes, one of their first and favorite solid foods, in a big pan of water out on the porch. Then I would pop the gang out there to practice their fishing skills while I tidied up their digs. That made for good multitasking, as they learned a skill they would need in the wild while I accomplished my very necessary cleaning task.

Once the gang's cage was livable again (by human standards), I would pop out to the porch too, refill the pan with grapes, and watch the show. You know how raccoons love water, and they certainly love tasty grapes, so it was a hoot to see their excitement over this activity. It caused quite a wet and crazy uproar, which was fine with me (although I then had to clean the porch).

The glitch in the plan came whenever it was time to catch them and put them back inside their clean cage. You would not believe how many hiding places a relatively small and fairly empty side porch contains in the minds of four raccoons looking to make a fast getaway. One would squeeze under the cedar chest I could barely get one finger under myself. Another would squeeze behind it, where I thought there wasn't so much as the smallest sliver of room. A third would disappear down the toe of a muck boot, making it hard at that odd angle to get a handle on anything but teeth. A fourth would somehow scamper into a cabinet I thought was firmly latched and then burrow behind

anything to stay out of sight and out of reach (and usually knocking everything over in the process). Besides honing their fishing skills on the porch, the gang got a lot of practice at hiding out in unreachable places. That was also a skill that would stand them in good stead once they were released into the wild, but I wasn't all that fond of them practicing it on me!

All too soon—and at the same time not nearly soon enough—the Ringtail Gang grew big enough that it became a challenge to keep them content in a cage when they weren't out for exercise, or even to keep them happy playing on our enticing little porch. The time was coming to let our little group of gangsters take over some new territory.