

# Kid's KOrner



Hiding behind deceptive black masks, two raccoon dogs prowl in Japan. Although they look and act much like raccoons, they are actually members of the canine family. Wild raccoon dogs range from the tropics to Siberia. Others are raised on farms in Finland; their coats sell for as much as \$5,000 in New York. American scientists are studying the Japanese raccoon dog's habits and a genetic makeup that sets it apart from the rest.

## Raccoon or dog? Scientists ponder animals' identity

HANOVER, NH — From the side, it looks like a short, pudgy dog with pointy ears and nose and salt-and-pepper coat. Face to face, it's pure raccoon.

Its black face mask is one reason the animal is known to Western scientists — the few who study it — as the raccoon dog. And although it's a member of the Canidae, or dog, family, some of its habits are uncannily raccoonlike.

In Japan, one of its native lands, it's more folk hero than canid. The Japanese believe raccoon dogs,

which they call tanukis, to be crafty and magical, able to vanish and reappear in different forms.

### Prowl by Night

The Japanese say tanukis revel by the light of the new moon, and they may be right. Raccoon dogs are mostly nocturnal, and until recently no one knew much about their activities at night — or during the day. Two American scientists, Dr. Doris Wurster-Hill of Dartmouth College and Dr. Oscar Ward of the University of Arizona, have spent months trailing the raccoon

dog, but a host of curiosities remain:

- Although the raccoon dog is definitely considered a dog, it doesn't act much like one. It is most active at night; is partial to river valleys and lakes (as are raccoons); devours nuts, berries, and fish but will raid garbage cans; climbs fences rather than jumps them; and doesn't bark. When retreating, however, it often steals a backward glance at its pursuer, in the manner of a coyote. And in winter, it dens up for

semihibernation, somewhat like a bear.

- Raccoon dogs can live almost anywhere, from tropical rain forests to Siberia. Yet no one knows their actual range today. Native to Southeast Asia, China, and the Soviet Union, they were introduced by the thousands in the 1920s to Eastern Europe and Finland as fur bearers. (Raccoon dog coats are still sold, sometimes as "Asiatic raccoon.") In recent years, individual raccoon dogs have been sighted as far south as

Vietnam and as far west as Switzerland and England.

- While some scientists consider it a primitive dog — raccoon dog fossils from China date to the Pliocene — others believe it's most closely related to foxes. And although classified as one species, the raccoon dog is actually five separate races, two of which are genetically distinct. The number of chromosomes — the blueprint for heredity found in the cells of living creatures — is only about 38 to 42 in

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## COLOR THIS!

- |           |               |
|-----------|---------------|
| 1. BLACK  | 6. LT. GREY   |
| 2. RED    | 7. GREEN      |
| 3. YELLOW | 8. LT. BROWN  |
| 4. BLUE   | 9. LT. BLUE   |
| 5. BROWN  | 10. LT. GREEN |

**BALLOONS: SEPT. 19, 1793**  
 THE MONTGOLFIER BROTHERS OF FRANCE LAUNCHED THE FIRST BALLOON. IT WAS MADE OF LINEN AND WAS OPEN AT THE BOTTOM. ITS PASSENGERS WERE A ROOSTER, A SHEEP AND A DUCK. THE ROPES WERE LOOSENED AND THE BALLOON ROSE. IT CAME DOWN WHEN THE HOT AIR COOLED.

