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From Nazi Past, a Proliferating Pest

By Craig Whitlock Washington Post Foreign Service Saturday, May 26, 2007; Page A11

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KASSEL, Germany -- In 1934, top Nazi party official Hermann Goering received a seemingly mundane request from the Reich Forestry Service. A fur farm near here was seeking permission to release a batch of exotic bushy-tailed critters into the wild to "enrich the local fauna" and give bored hunters something new to shoot at.

Goering approved the request and unwittingly uncorked an ecological disaster that is still spreading across Europe. The imported North American species, Procyon lotor, or the common raccoon, quickly took a liking to the forests of central Germany. Encountering no natural predators -- and with hunters increasingly called away by World War II -- the woodland creatures fruitfully multiplied and have stymied all attempts to prevent them from overtaking the Continent.

Today, as many as 1 million raccoons are estimated to live in Germany, and their numbers are steadily increasing. In 2005, hunters and speeding cars killed 10 times as many raccoons as a decade earlier, according to official statistics.

Raccoons have crawled across the border to infest each of Germany's neighbors and now range from the Baltic Sea to the Alps. Scientists say they have been spotted as far east as Chechnya. British tabloids have warned that it's only a matter of time until the "Nazi raccoons" cross the English Channel.

For the most part, the raccoons haven't disrupted the natural order of things in the forests, although some people blame them for reducing the number of songbirds by stealing eggs from their nests. Rather, the biggest impact has been on humans. Complaints are soaring about fearless raccoons that penetrate homes and destroy property, saddling owners with expensive repair bills and hard-to-dislodge pests.

The Germans call them Waschbaeren, or "wash bears," because they habitually wash their paws and douse their food in water. And no place in Germany has more of them than Kassel, a city of about 200,000 people in the central state of Hesse.

For the mask-faced mammals, it has plenty of leafy suburban back

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Frank Becker, a raccoon trapper, holds a young "Waschbaer" he caught on a client's roof. (By Craig Whitlock -- The Washington Post)

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yards that border large tracts of public forests. The city lies less than 20 miles from the Nazi fur farm that is usually blamed for Germany's raccoon explosion -- wildlife biologists say the problem was aggravated by the release of raccoons from other farms that sustained bomb damage during World War II.

Five years ago, a family of raccoons scratched and munched their way into a house belonging to Ingrid and Dieter Hoffmann of Kassel. The brood settled into the Hoffmanns' chimney and -- despite efforts to smoke them out -- ruined their roof, which cost tens of thousands of dollars to fix. The Hoffmanns also spent about \$1,300 to raccoon-proof their residence with electrified gutters and other countermeasures.

"The little ones look cute and have a pretty face," said Ingrid Hoffmann, 70, who like her husband is a retired orthodontist. "But their mother can bite your finger off."

Dieter Hoffmann wagged an accusing finger at a visitor: "We like the [United States of America](#), but we do not like your Waschbaeren!"

Most Europeans are not used to sharing their habitat with wild animals. So while some Germans regard raccoons as a troublemaking alien species that deserves to die out, their neighbors across the backyard fence may see them instead as furry-faced novelties and toss them edible goodies.

"The city of Kassel is divided down the middle," said Theodor Arend, a forestry official based in nearby Wolfhagen, who keeps a stuffed raccoon mounted in his office. "One says, 'How cute, how nice,' so they give them raisins and bananas. The other side would like to shoot them to the moon."

Arend recalled a case involving an 80-year-old Kassel woman who allowed 50 raccoons to colonize her home. Authorities eventually declared a health hazard. "The smell was unbelievable, but the lady was very happy," he said.

Kassel officials have struggled for years to come up with an effective population-control strategy. In the mid-1990s, the city offered bounties to hunters in an effort to reduce the numbers, but the program backfired. Female raccoons had bigger litters to compensate for the losses, said Hartmut Bierwirth, who oversees city hunting licenses.

The challenge has been further clouded by ethical debates over animal rights vs. human rights.

For now, the city limits its efforts to handing out pamphlets urging residents to secure their garbage and compost heaps, two prime feeding areas. Those tormented by the varmints have two options: deal with the problem themselves or call a private trapper such as Frank Becker.

Becker owns a firewood dealership and lumberyard in Kassel but has developed a thriving side business in raccoon removal and prevention. He catches as many as 200 a year in his homemade wooden traps.

He loads the inside of the trap with sticky bread or something sweet and fastens it to a tripwire. As soon as the raccoon grabs the bait, the side doors slam shut. The trap doesn't harm the animals, but Becker finishes off the captured ones with a rifle shot to the head.

"No one else does it as professionally as I do," he boasted. "I always succeed, always. Raccoons in Germany don't really have any natural enemies -- except me."

Trapping is usually just a temporary fix, however; Becker said it's just a matter of time before more raccoons move into the neighborhood. As a result, he said, he concentrates on selling home-security systems that zap creatures seeking to force their way in.

For a man who has caught thousands of the animals, he's been tempted to eat a raccoon only once. "It's a very intensive taste, a wild animal taste," he said. "But there's just no demand for any part of

them, basically." He did keep the pelt, though, and turned it into a coonskin cap.

Special correspondent Shannon Smiley contributed to this report.

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