

COLUMNISTS

Look out and look up - for porcupines!

Rebecca Harris Special to the Reporter-News

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When I was a kid I spent as much time as I could outside exploring my grandma's pasture. During that time I saw deer, hawks, armadillos, snakes, skunks – just a wide variety of animals. It was wonderful. But throughout that entire time, I never saw a porcupine.

Last January I was once again exploring grandma's pasture when my dogs all alerted on a tree. Lo and behold, a porcupine was hanging out in the tree! The porcupine didn't seem to mind our presence; but, of all the places I thought I would encounter one, a tree would not have been my first guess. This led me to read more about them.

North American porcupines are stocky, large rodents that are characterized by their sharp quills. Porcupines usually weigh 11-24 pounds and males are usually larger than females. While they are near-sighted, they possess exceptional auditory and olfactory senses. Their diet consists of tree bark and leaves but they also eat mistletoe, pine needles and herbaceous ground vegetation.

Their diet explains why they are experts at climbing trees. They move methodically and sometimes awkwardly while climbing, but once a porcupine reaches its meal it will prop itself up using its tail while the hind feet grasp the bark. The porcupine is then free to use its forelimbs to gather bark and foliage. They descend from the tree by backing down the trunk. A fall from the tree can result in bone fractures that are able to heal.

Porcupines are habitat generalists, meaning they are able to survive in a variety of habitats. They do prefer mixed forests, and they tend to den in hollow trees, stumps, logs, caves, abandoned buildings and under large rocks and the roots of overturned trees. Porcupine scat is evident in and around their dens.

During the winter they don't hibernate. Most of their life is spent in solitude; however, in winter several have been observed sharing the same cave. They also mingle during the breeding season. Their summer range is much larger (25-35 acres) than the winter range (6-12 acres).

Breeding occurs in late summer and early fall, and the offspring are born about seven months later. Porcupines can have one or two young, and when they are born they weigh almost a pound. At birth the porcupine has its eyes open, some teeth and they already have their quills. Quills are soft during birth but harden within an hour. Can you imagine?

Now, about those needle-sharp quills covering the upper parts of the porcupine's body and tail. They are actually derived from hairs and are modified for defense. About 30,000 hollow, barbed quills attach loosely to their skin and can become dislodged easily.

Contrary to popular belief, porcupines cannot throw their quills at an attacker. The porcupines cause their quills to become erect when attacked by a predator or attacking an intruder. The quills detach easily and painfully penetrate the skin of the predator. The thick muscular tail can drive the quills into an attacker, and the barbs on the end of the quills can allow them to go deeper into a predator's skin.

When a predator attempts to catch one, a porcupine will defend itself by thrusting its head into a root crevice, or beneath a log or rock. When approached in the open they constantly shift their position to orient the back and tail towards the potential source of danger.

Many predators such as coyotes, foxes, bears, minks, martens and great-horned owls will consume them if they can. Only the fisher (an animal related to the badger) is the habitual predator of the porcupine.

Although humans have detrimentally affected many species, it seems that porcupines are doing just fine as they continue to expand their range. There have been several sightings in our West Texas counties. A porcupine was actually spotted in a tree at Abilene State Park. Go visit the park – you never know what you'll see when you look up!

Rebecca Harris is a Big Country Master Naturalist. Texas Master Naturalists are volunteers promoting education, service and conservation for our natural areas. They are sponsored by Texas Parks and Wildlife and Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. Be sure and visit Abilene State Park and our great Texas outdoors.