

Living with Wildlife - Porcupines

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EMC Lifestyle - The Porcupine (*Erethizon dorastum*) is Canada's second largest rodent next to the beaver, weighing between 5-6 kilograms.

Its coat consists of a soft, woolly undercoat and coarse, long guard hairs that are dark at the tip. The guard hairs conceal quills that have been estimated at over 30,000. Some are relatively short while on the back they may be up to 12.5 centimetres in length. There are no quills on the muzzle, legs or under parts of the body, allowing the fisher to sometimes tree and kill a porcupine this way.

It is a myth that porcupines "throw" their quills. The accuracy with which they can defend themselves - a flick of the tail is almost too fast for the eye to follow - and the barb on the end of the quill, tends to fuel this myth.

Although a porcupine spends most of its time in trees, it can be found lumbering along a trail, moving from one feeding area to another, mostly in late afternoon or at dusk. It is during this time that people walking their dog in a wooded area should be sure to have it leashed.

Its diet during the winter consists of the inner bark and needles from trees such as pine and hemlock and, come spring, the succulent new growth of deciduous trees like poplar, sugar maple and basswood.

Porcupines do not hibernate but stay close to their winter den. Large rock piles or caves provide shelter over the winter but sometimes a porcupine will be observed hunched high in a tree even during subzero weather.

The porcupine leads a solitary existence except during the mating season in October and November when its high-pitched squeals and screams have startled many people.

It has a relatively long gestation period of more than 200 days, with the young born between mid-May and late June. Usually only one porcupine is born, with twins being exceedingly rare.

Baby porcupines are stashed on the ground, near the base of a tree or hollow log while its mother feeds in a nearby tree. Never assume a young porcupine is orphaned unless a dead

female is found on a nearby road.

Although the literature states that baby porcupines wean at seven to 10 days, we found that they continued to nurse for many weeks. This was the case for orphans as well as a baby born to an injured adult at the Ottawa-Carleton Wildlife Centre. It also makes sense that a mammal with only a single offspring would care for it for a longer period of time.

For more information on wildlife, please visit www.wildlifeinfo.ca.

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