

Dispelling myths: Prickly Porcupines



By Katharine Fletcher

Porcupines are sometimes regarded with dismay verging on fear because their bodies are covered with 30,000 or so long needle-like quills. No cuddly critter here: instead, they resemble squat pincushions on legs.

That is, if you can *see* their legs: these very short, chubby looking animals have a rolling, waddling gait when they move. Tails are also short and covered with quills.

However scary they may seem, porcupines are not aggressive and needn't be feared – but do take care if you are fortunate enough to see one, especially if it is on the ground. Calmly keep your distance to carefully observe it. You won't have much time because, like all wild animals, porcupines rightly fear human beings. They will waddle off and clamber up the closest tree or into a pile of rocks as quickly as they can.

The myth. People erroneously believe porcupines deliberately aim and “throw” their quills.

The Canadian Wildlife Federation website (www.hww.ca) helps explain how the porcupine got this reputation: “It lashes its tail threateningly when disturbed, possibly detaching loose quills, which fly through the air as though they were thrown.

What's key here are the words “as if.” In other words, quills could be – but not necessarily – “launched” when the animal moves its tail. However, porcupines are not actually throwing their quills, as

“urban legends” imply.

Be a detective: read wildlife warnings. If you (or your kids or your dog) get too close, porcupines will give fair warning to back off. First, it will turn its back on you, raising the spines on its back into a stiff, spiky ridge, and move from one back foot to another in a slow, swaying motion.

It is warning you clearly to back off immediately. If you ignore this sign and approach closer, watch out! The porcupine will now start to swing its tail from side to side. At this point, if you, your child or dog come into contact with the animal, quills will not only come off: they will penetrate your skin.

The barbs. Quills are not “only” needle-sharp. They are barbed (hooked) at the end. This means once they’ve penetrated skin, they are not only extremely painful to remove, but they also work themselves further and further into flesh.

Anyone who has seen a dog after it has attacked a porcupine has immense respect for these wild animals. And some dogs just don’t get it: dogs commonly repeatedly attack porcupines. This is the height of stupidity. Removing quills from a dog’s muzzle or other parts is an extremely difficult and painful process which isn’t any fun for owner or dog — or veterinarian.

Therefore, learn to be a detective and understand wildlife clues. Teach children to keep their distance from all wild animals, not only the slow-moving porcupine. And, if you like taking your dog into the forests for exercise, porcupines give us one very good reason why we are asked to keep pets on their leashes at all times in wildlife sanctuaries.

Destroyer of trees. Woodlot owners – or anyone who loves trees – don’t like porcupines much. Because of their diet, porcupines eat the juicy bark of trees such as poplars, alders and hemlock. And they don’t just take a tentative nibble. Instead, they frequently ring trees, removing all of the bark around a tree’s girth.

This kills the tree because the bark not only protects the plant but helps convey water from the roots to the canopy.

Wonders of nature. Before you or your family think porcupines are destructive pests, let's take a minute to appreciate them for the wonders of nature that they truly are. Imagine having quills instead of our smooth skin – or the fur of most mammals. Quills, you'd think, would be awkward and uncomfortable. However, as we've learned, they make an effective defence against predator attack. In fact, the main predator of porcupines (other than us) is a weasel called the fisher.

Birthing a ball of quills? Inquiring minds want to know how porcupines can possibly give birth to their young. When they are born, babies have very soft, flexible quills. After birth, these harden when exposed to air.

Take a look... up! Want to find a porcupine? Look up, way up into the tops of trees especially in April, before deciduous trees start to leaf. This is the best time to spot "balls of prickles" overhead. Take your binoculars when you walk in the woods in spring and you may find one. You'll quickly notice that the quills are dark black at the body, fading to silvery white at the tips.

Special hint. When porcupines climb smooth-barked trees such as young poplars, look for their claw marks on the tree trunk. And another thing: with your kids, closely examine the bark because you may be as lucky as I was one day, and find a quill embedded in a hemlock's rough bark.

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