

Hill Country Surprises – Porcupines

by Paul Mebane

One of the surprises to newcomers to the Hill Country is that we have porcupines. You just don't usually see them (except for the occasional road kill) – they are nocturnal, elusive and solitary.

Porcupines are fascinating creatures. Technically, they are large rodents – but with teeth like a beaver, feet like a bear, claws like a badger, fur like sheep's wool, and spines like a pincushion, the porcupine is a combination almost beyond description. Bowlegged and pigeon-toed, the porcupine slowly ambles along, swinging its fat body from side to side, muttering to itself, much like an absent-minded person. Mumbles, murmurs, moans, grunts, and whines are common. With a well-developed sense of balance, they are expert at climbing and sleeping in trees.

In Texas, the porcupine inhabits forested areas in the west but prefers rocky areas, ridges, and slopes. The more massive and broken the rocks (as in the Hill Country), the better the numerous crevices and caves serve the animals as den sites. The young, usually one, rarely two, are born in the Spring. Growth is slow, but the porcupine can live up to ten years in the wild. During the warm months, the porcupine feeds on twigs, leaves and green plants. In wintertime, however, it eats the tender bark off trees. They usually don't circle a tree completely but can cause severe damage to saplings. In the Hill Country, if you see trees stripped of bark around the base, it is not a beaver but a pesky porcupine. Porcupines are also fond of salt, and this attracts them to nibble on canoe paddles, boots, backpack straps, clothing or anything else that may have a trace of salt from perspiration.

(One has to have great admiration for porcupines who wish to mate. There is a story that true Texas porcupines lay circular eggs with small porcupine-like protrusions under sweet gum trees in the fall. These eggs can be painful to handle, so be careful when trying to pick them up or to cook or fry them.)

While pleasant enough when left alone, the porcupine is quick to defend itself when threatened. With a top speed of little more than a fast waddle, it can escape very few animals; however, with its defensive weapons, it has no need for speed. Researchers estimate the porcupine has a protective body armor of about 30,000 quills – really modified hair with a sharp point. The position of the quills can be a good indicator of the porcupine's mood. When the animal is relaxed and unafraid, the quills lie flat, hidden under a layer of long guard hairs. While it is not true that the porcupine can throw its quills, it is easy to understand why the idea persists. When a porcupine senses danger, it lifts its quills into the vertical position. The next step is to waggle its tail from side to side. If these warnings are ignored, the porcupine whirls around and, with teeth chattering and tail thrashing, it advances in a backward position. During this violent tail lashing, some of the older quills that were ready to be shed are dislodged. Occasionally one of these quills finds a target, but no aiming or throwing occurs.

While porcupine quills are the oldest form of Native American embroidery, they are more likely to get imbedded in dogs, cats, horses, cattle, automobile tires and humans. The surface of a quill shaft appears smooth, but the darkened tip has thousands of overlapping, diamond-shaped, backward-pointing scales arranged like shingles on a roof. The scales lie flat as the quill enters, but in the warmth and moisture of the wound, they flare open slightly, making easy removal out of the question. Although backward movement of the quills is effectively stopped by the scales, forward movement is not restricted. Muscle contractions around an embedded quill can cause it to move inward. Most authorities agree that the best way to remove a quill is with a quick jerk as soon as possible. The wound should be treated because quill punctures sometimes become infected. Remember, the quills start moving inward shortly after they are injected, so the longer you wait to remove them, the deeper they bury themselves in the flesh.

Dogs can easily scare porcupines into attacking, thus a dog with a face full of quills is not unusual. The quills can migrate inward within the body, be broken off under the skin by the dogs pawing, or be swallowed. Removing many quills is painful and uncomfortable, so dogs are usually sedated by vets. Antibiotics are also usually prescribed in case of an infection forming from a quill broken off under the skin.

Always keep a close eye on your dog when they are outside, especially at night, and prevent them from exploring areas where they might surprise a porcupine.

Do watch for porcupines here on Cordillera, and don't be surprised if you see one waddling across the road or sleeping up in a tree. Just don't try to pet it!