

Porcupine

(*Erethizon dorsatum*)

Order: Rodentia

Family: Erethizontidae

Porcupines live across much of North America in our woodlands, especially mixed forests. They are the largest rodents in North America after the Beaver.



These slow moving, docile creatures are known by their unique quills. These hollow shafts lay flat against their body until the porcupine feels threatened. They then contract the muscles in the skin, which raises the quills and makes them more easily dislodged. When the quills come in contact with an object, they are pushed in, and thus loosened from the skin. The barb on the end helps to attach the quill to the new host.

Fortunately, the quills have a dose of antibiotic, which prevents infection as the barb works the quill further into the object to which it has attached itself. The porcupine is the only native North American mammal to have natural antibiotics in its skin. This is also helpful to the porcupine when they fall out of trees and are stuck with their own quills.

Porcupines are vegetarians and enjoy eating buds on trees, which are often quite high up, leaving them vulnerable to falling despite strong claws and legs. They also enjoy fruit, but will survive on bark over the winter as they do not hibernate. They can be seen more easily in winter without leaves on the trees as they often rest in trees during the day, and move about at night. This leaves them very vulnerable to being hit by cars. They are quite nearsighted, but have an excellent memory of where the best trees are located.

The 30,000 quills are located all over the body, including around the eyes, except for the underbelly, face and feet. They also have hair, which is a dark grey or black as a baby, becoming increasingly lighter as they age, resulting in a fairly grey adult colour. Both the quills and the hair serve to insulate them in the winter.

Porcupines are solitary creatures, coming together to mate in the fall, and then going their separate ways. The gestation period is quite long at 202 days. The baby is called a porcupette. They are born with quills that are soft, but harden within hours or days when exposed to oxygen. These quills are much shorter and softer than those of the adult. The young will sometimes stay with their mother through the first winter. They can live over 20 years.

Their worst predators are humans, followed by Fishers and Coyotes who will attack them and wear them down until they are able to flip them over and reach the belly where there are no quills. However, humans often consider them to be a nuisance and shoot them, or they are hit by cars at night.

Thank you to National Geographic for the distribution map