

Porcupines in Texas By Susan Heath

Did you know there are porcupines in Texas? Well it's true! Porcupines are native to most of Canada and the western U.S. including north and west Texas. In recent years they have been spreading to central Texas as well. I recently saw one at a park in Kerrville along the Guadalupe River. It was balled up in a tree looking quite like a pincushion taking a nap.

Although they can weigh up to 30 pounds, they are skilled climbers and can make their way up a tree easily where they eat leaves, twigs and inner bark and clearly also take naps! They forage on the ground too and eat vegetation including skunk cabbage and clover. Porcupines are North America's second largest rodent, with the beaver being the largest.

Of course, the elephant in the room with porcupines is their quills. They can have up to 30,000 of them! Quills are actually stiff hairs with barbed tips and they cover all parts of a porcupine except the stomach. We've all heard the stories of porcupines propelling their quills but it just isn't true. Their quills can only be released when they come in contact with something.

When a porcupine feels threatened it will turn its back, raise its quills so it looks larger and fiercer and lash out with its tail. If the tail comes in contact with the aggressor, then the quills release and become embedded. Ouch! I've seen lots of photos and videos of dogs with a face full of quills. So painful! Porcupines are not aggressive unless they feel threatened so if you see one, observe it from a distance and neither you nor the porcupine will get hurt.

Porcupines are solitary animals so you're not likely to see more than one at a time. They come together to mate in late summer and early fall. Males compete for females by performing elaborate dances and the female picks the winner. Gestation is seven months so the female will give birth to a single baby in the spring.

If you're wondering how a female can give birth to something with sticky quills all over it, think no more. The quills on a baby porcupine are soft until about an hour after birth when they hardened up. So I guess if you want to snuggle with a porcupine, you have to find a newborn baby one! Baby porcupines begin foraging on their own only a few days after birth but will stay with their mother for about six months until she is ready to mate again.

We're lucky to have this unique animal in our state. If you are fortunate enough to find one, stand clear and observe this wild and really cool animal!

Photo: Porcupine in Kerrville, taken by Barbara Pankratz