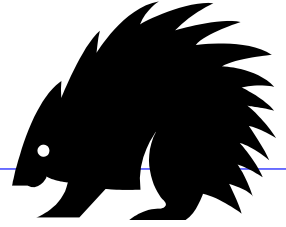


LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

Humane, Effective Solutions to Human-Wildlife Conflicts

A Program of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals



Porcupines

In cities, suburbs, and small towns across Massachusetts, people are noticing a change in their neighborhoods. Some think it's good. Some think it's bad. But everybody seems to be talking about it: more wild animals are making their homes in and around people's yards and houses, in parks and playgrounds, in business developments, even right on Main Street.

Porcupines are known for their unique defense mechanism. Contrary to popular belief, however, porcupines do not throw their quills; they come off when an animal or person touches them. These nocturnal herbivores can cause some damage to trees but they are harmless unless you touch them.

General Information

The North American porcupine is the second largest of all rodents. Porcupines have small heads and chunky bodies and grow up to 25 to 40 inches long from head to tail (which can grow as long as 8 inches). The male and female are approximately the same size and can weigh between 10 and 40 pounds. The front of a porcupine's body is covered with long, yellowish guard hairs, while the back and tail are covered with up to 30,000 quills which are interspersed among dark, coarse guard hairs. A porcupine's two large front teeth will continue to grow throughout its entire life, but will be worn down from chewing.

Porcupines are slow-moving, near-sighted animals that would be ill equipped to avoid being killed by

predators if they did not have their unique natural defensive system - quills. Contrary to popular belief, porcupines do not throw their quills; animals and people must actually come into contact with the quills for them to detach and become embedded. When a porcupine feels threatened, it turns its backside to the enemy and tries to drive its tail against the assailant. If the assailant ignores this and makes contact with the porcupine, they will be painfully "quilled". Porcupines are usually benign creatures but like any other animal, they must be able to defend themselves from predators.

Porcupines are primarily nocturnal animals and rest during the day on tree branches; in hollow trees and logs; in underground burrows or in crevices found in rocky areas. They are most commonly found in coniferous or evergreen forests but have also been found in deciduous woodlands and among Creosote in North American deserts.

Porcupines are strict herbivores and virtually all species of trees found within a porcupine's range can be eaten. During warm months, porcupines eat leaves, buds, nuts, fruit, twigs and green plants. During the winter, they chew through the outer tree bark to eat the tissue-like inner bark, called cambium. Porcupines have been known to strip or "girdle" tree bark from both the trunk and upper limbs, which can sometimes kill the tree.

Breeding occurs in the fall or early winter and is followed by a 210-day gestation period (the longest rodent gestation period). In the spring, the female gives birth to 1 or 2 young. They are born with soft quills that harden within hours of birth. Their eyes open 10 days later. After 2 weeks, they start to eat solid food but they continue to nurse for 4 to 5 months. The average life expectancy of a wild porcupine is 5 to 6 years, while their captive counterparts have been known to live up to 10 years.

Possible Conflicts and Solutions

The primary conflict with porcupines occurs when a person or pet ignores the warning signals and ends up with quills lodged in their skin.

The quills are the most recognized and misunderstood porcupine feature. Each porcupine quill has a greasy coating and a small, backward projecting barb at the tip that serves to work the quills ever deeper into the flesh. Once imbedded, quills cannot easily be pulled out.

Serious injury can result if eyes, mouths or throats are afflicted by quills. To ensure the quills are removed completely and correctly, a veterinarian should treat pets that have had a run-in with a porcupine and humans should contact their physician immediately.

Due to a diet low in sodium, porcupines may try to satisfy their dietary need for salt by eating road salt; chewing on wooden structures, tools, and other materials used in outdoor work or recreation; chewing almost any object that has been handled by humans because of the salt found in human sweat; and chewing car tires and hoses for their road salt coating. Porcupines are also attracted to the glue used to bond plywood on wooden structures.

Seawater and road salt should be washed off of tires, especially on boat trailers and other vehicles that are parked outside. To protect plastic tubing and hoses, you can use a capsaicin-based, "hot sauce" repellent that is registered for use against porcupines. This should be reapplied after rain.

If you need to protect trees from being chewed, you can place a

THE **LIVING WITH WILDLIFE** MISSION

The MSPCA Living With Wildlife program aims to protect wild species, now and in the future. The program promotes peaceful coexistence between people and wildlife in urban, suburban, and rural Massachusetts communities by helping to resolve human-animal conflicts in a humane, nonlethal, long-term and cost-effective manner.

metal band around the trunk of the tree, about 3 feet off of the ground. This will keep the tree from being climbed and the bark from being stripped. This band should not be left on the tree longer than necessary because insects may accumulate and lay eggs under it. If you are protecting a fruit-bearing tree during the winter, it is important that the band is placed 3 feet above the expected maximum level of snow.

Public Health Concerns

Porcupines do not carry any communicable diseases that are of concern to humans. The main safety issue is the possibility of being "quilled".

For more information about humanely solving human-wildlife conflicts or about the MSPCA's Living with Wildlife program, call 617-524-5632, visit www.LivingWithWildlife.org or e-mail livingwithwildlife@mspca.org.