

North American Porcupine *Erethizon dorsatum*

Many people have not seen porcupines in the wild. These large rodents are usually nocturnal, but may also come out during the day.

When I was a child, I remembered seeing one cross our lawn. Years afterwards, we sometimes saw them lying dead on the roadside because they had been killed by a car. The road kill provided us with an opportunity to get close-up pictures of various parts of the animal, such as the quills and paws.

Porcupines have a spiny coat of quills to defend themselves from predators. The quills, which are really modified hairs, are released when another creature comes in contact with them. They cannot be thrown or projected. Native Americans used the quills and guard hairs to decorate their clothing.

I also photographed the mounted specimen in the Taylor County Historical Society Museum. In 1988, I was able to video tape one held in captivity . I continued to hope to see one in the wild. In 2006, a friend, Mike Riegert, told us that he knew where some porcupines could be seen in the wild in the deep forest. So, on a cold wintry day on March 4th we trudged for about two-thirds of a mile through the deep snow to find one. We followed the tracks of one of these slow, quiet forest creatures. Carrying the camera and walking through deep snow was a challenge. Finally, we arrived at the place where a porcupine was feeding on its favorite winter food plant, a hemlock tree. The porcupine is an herbivore, which means that it eats green plants like clover in spring and summer and in winter eats bark and needles from trees. The porcupine had climbed up a very, very tall hemlock tree and moved on out near the end of a branch where it felt quite safe from predators. A telephoto lens allowed me to get pictures of the animal enjoying eating hemlock needles. We returned, walking slowly through the deep snow, to a spot where two of them had a den. One was coming home and slowly ambled toward us but decided to climb a tree when he saw us. The other was safely tucked in the den. Its nose was way back inside and all that was visible was the prickly tail end. I felt fairly sure that it would not quickly back out toward me, so I climbed into the den to get a few rare photographs. Much scat littered the entrance of the den.

What other forest dwellers enjoyed this quiet solitary area? Some of the trees had large holes made by a Pileated Woodpecker. There were fisher, red squirrel, deer and coyote tracks. Birds flew through the trees.

Pictures collected over a period of many years have been put together to make a video about porcupines. Music has been added to the silent pictures that were taken. Imagine yourself joining the porcupines and their companion forest dwellers as they enjoy life in the woods.

Written by Loretta Kuse

March 4, 2006 Diary

Mike Riegert showed us where there are some porcupines. Loretta walked in about two-thirds of a mile and back with Mike and got pictures of a Porcupine high up in a Hemlock tree. Then they went to photograph two in a den but one was out walking. She got pictures of the one coming home and climbing a tree and the one in the den. Hildegard went along but stayed in the car and worked on thank-you notes, diary, and script. We saw a Pileated Woodpecker, a Raven, and some Snow Buntings. Also some larger gray birds that we couldn't identify.