

Fact Sheet on Porcupines

What are Porcupines?



Porcupines are large slow rodents with long claws, so they can climb trees. They are the third largest rodent in the world and are covered with a coat of sharp quills. These quills allow them to defend themselves from predators. The average lifespan for porcupines in the wild is 15 years. Females will only have one baby per year. We have 12 different species of porcupines in Latin America, with the Mexican hairy dwarf Porcupine (*Coendou Mexicanus*) being the only one found in Belize.



Where do Porcupines live?

They are arboreal, which means they live and find their food in trees. They rarely come down to the ground. They spend much of the day sleeping in hollow trees, crouched on branches or in tangles of woody vines.

What do Porcupines eat?



The porcupines found in Belize are nocturnal, so they spend the night foraging for food. Being herbivores, porcupines do not eat meat and feed mostly on leaves, pine-needles, herbs, twigs and the thin bark of trees. They use their sharp and strong teeth to chew through tough wood and seeds. Their long incisors are used to tear into bark.

Are Porcupines dangerous and what would be warning signs?

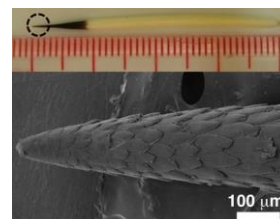


No, porcupines are not dangerous when left alone. First, a porcupine will always try to run and climb a tree. If you allow a path of escape then they will leave you alone. If the porcupine feels trapped and cannot get away, the next line of defense is to chatter its teeth and lastly, to display its impressive 30,000 quills, making it look big and scary to the attacker. Call the Wildlife Advice Hotline - 0800 822 8888, if you ever need help with a porcupine and never try to handle it by yourself.

Do Porcupines shoot their quills?



No, this is only a myth. Porcupines cannot shoot quills. When faced with a threat such as a human or animal, they will erect their quills, much like a pin cushion. The white tips of the quills act as a warning sign to the predator that the porcupine is not to be messed with. The quills will then loosen and as the predator gets too close the porcupine will slap the attacker with its tail. There are barbs at the end of each quill, which makes them difficult to remove.



Microscopic view of the tip of the quill of a porcupine

How do I avoid problems or conflict with Porcupines?



The best thing to do if you come in contact with a porcupine is to leave it alone and give it a way to escape.

A porcupine will choose flight over fight.

Another very important thing is to keep your dogs indoors or to tie them up at night, so that they cannot roam freely. A dog will lose the fight with a porcupine and as the quills get embedded in the skin. Removal of those quills is very hard and painful. If your dog got into a fight with a porcupine, please seek immediate veterinary medical care. Do not break the quills or try to remove them yourself. As the quills are barbed, they work themselves deep into the muscle and cause a lot of pain, so they have to be removed quickly.

If you have a porcupine in your house or in an enclosed space, please call the Wildlife Advice Hotline 0800 822 8888. A cornered porcupine is a dangerous porcupine. If you find an injured porcupine that needs medical attention, please call the Belize Wildlife and Referral Clinic under 632 3257



FUN FACTS ABOUT PORCUPINES

The name Porcupine means "quill pig."

Quills of the porcupine are made of keratin, which is the same component that our nails and hair are made of.

At the end of each quill right under the skin is a muscle. It's the same muscle that makes our hair stand up when we have goosebumps.

A female porcupine gives birth to one single baby once a year and the baby leaves the mom at about 3 months of age

Predators of the porcupines include Cougars, Jaguars, Ocelot and Coyotes. They have learned to flip the porcupine over and injure them on their belly, where they have no quills.

Porcupines are not considered a threatened species. The single largest threat to porcupines is habitat loss, though they can adapt to minor habitat changes.



ILLUSTRATION BY ANNA SERRAO

Numbers to call for advice on Porcupines:

The Forest Department: 822 1524 | FB: Belize Forest Department

Belize Wildlife and Referral Clinic

- 24/7 Hotline: 615-5159

- Web: belizewildlifeclinic.org