

Nature Notes

Porcupine



The porcupine or *Erethizon dorsatum*, which translates as quill pig, is Canada's second largest rodent after the beaver. It has a short blunt nose, small eyes, a short, thick, muscular tail and humped shoulders. An adult male can weight up to 5.5 kg and is 70 to 100 cm in length.

The porcupine is most famous for its 30,000 sharp, long, yellow and black, hollow, barbed quills. The quills are modified hairs embedded in the skin,

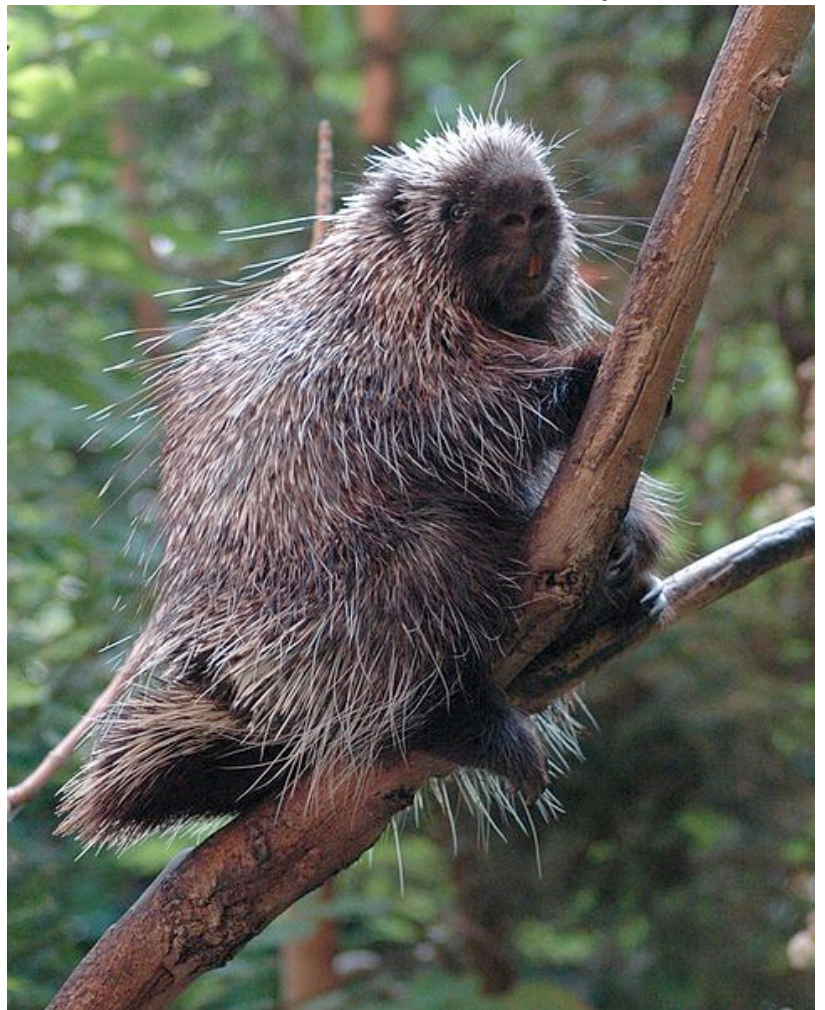


concealed by guard hairs until the porcupine is threatened. These quills detach easily and grow back if lost. The tip of the tapered quill is covered by several dozen small black barbs which swell when moistened, i.e., embedded in flesh. This allows the quill to

Quills Photo by A. Stekelvarken

work its way deeper and deeper into flesh. The legs, belly and face are un-quilled. If attacked and unable to retreat to a tree the animal turns its back to the attacker, tucks its head between its shoulders, the quills fluff out covering the feet and the tail lashes quickly back and forth.

The porcupine is solitary and mostly nocturnal. During the day they climb high up in a tree to sleep in safety. Their food source in spring and summer is leaves and in winter the inner bark of trees. They will gnaw on wood, leather and cast-off antlers to wear down their continuously growing teeth.



Porcupine in tree Photo by J Glover

If you see a porcupine in the Kimberley Nature Park, look but don't touch and keep Fido under control.

Visit www.kimberleynaturepark.ca for a hard copy or more information about Nature Park events.