

BOGDIVERSITY THURSDAY



—*from Head Naturalist Clinton*

North American Porcupine

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Today we feature a sought after and misunderstood mammal that you can find in the Sax-Zim Bog all year round. This mammal has been tricky to see this winter, but is not uncommon to those who spend lots of time in the Sax-Zim Bog.

North American Porcupines are the 2nd largest rodent species (reaching 3 feet long and weighing up to 40 pounds!) in the United States and the only member of its family found in North America. All of the relatives of this species are found in Mexico, Central America, or northern South America. Like its much smaller cousins, the North American Porcupine is primarily arboreal (tree dwelling), though they do occupy den sites on and in the ground. Porcupines are typically slow moving, with poor eyesight, and heavily-padded and clawed feet adapted for climbing. It is also hard to talk about porcupines without mentioning quills!

Porcupine quills are impressive! These highly-modified hairs cover the lower back and top of a porcupine's tail. An individual porcupine might have over 30,000 quills! Contrary to common

myths, porcupines cannot shoot their quills and their quills are not poisonous. Porcupine quills must be touched to become detached. When threatened, porcupines will often stand their ground and turn their tails, exposing their quills to potential predators. Young porcupines, known as porcupettes, are equipped with quills from birth.

Because they are often found in trees and have protective quills, porcupines have very few predators. In fact, in the Sax-Zim Bog, the only regular predator of porcupines is the fisher! Not only are fishers agile tree climbers, but they have figured out how to catch and kill porcupines without ending up with a face or paws full of quills!

The biggest threat to porcupines in our area are negative interactions with humans. Porcupines eat a lot of tree bark and can kill otherwise healthy trees, which often gives them a bad name. In their pursuit of salts and with their need to constantly chew, porcupines have been known to chew wooden structures, canoe paddles, axe handles, etc. causing further discontent with humans. Roads and car collisions are a big issue in some parts of their range, with noticeable mortality increases in the spring.

North American Porcupines can be found throughout the Sax-Zim Bog. If you find areas with lots of chewed trees, check back at dawn or dusk and look for these wonderful mammals up high!

More information in the photos below!

(Photos by Sparky Stensaas and Head Naturalist Clinton)



Porcupines are most active at dawn and dusk, but you can find them lounging in trees during the day. Areas of activity change through the year, so finding recent foraging sign is a great way to find them!



This young porcupine is showing a typical defensive posture! Note how obvious the quills become when the fur is raised. This little porcupine was also gnashing its teeth at our curious group of observers.



Porcupine foraging sign is sometimes similar to woodpecker sign, but if you get up close to a recently chewed tree you can see definite teeth marks! Sometimes porcupines chew a little bit of a tree and move on, but occasionally they will chew trees from top to bottom.



Porcupine tracks are not always easy to find. They have very short steps and wide feet. When snow is deep, they often leave a trough as they are short legged. This set, at Blue Dasher Bog last year, lead to a wintering den!



Finding porcupine wintering dens is exciting! They utilize the cavities left by downed trees.