



a desert place

Natural beauty
through preservation

Sentinel
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Throughout the summer months, the Sentinel is publishing its popular "A Desert Place" columns from past issues. This week takes us back to 1987 and Penny Cox's thoughts on porcupines. The columns were provided by the Cave Creek Improvement Association.

By PENNY COX

Although one would associate the porcupine with the upper and northern elevations in the pinyon-juniper areas of the upper Sonoran zone and more rarely on the lower deserts.

The porcupine is the only mammal native to the United States which has quills. He is about 30 inches long and his tail is about 9 inches with a salt-and-pepper color.

His coat is made of guard hairs (9 inches) and mixed in with these hairs are thousands of quills ranging from 1 to 4 inches.

His ears are small and lie close to his head and the eyes are small and dull.

He has long, broad yellow chisel-like teeth. His front teeth are armed with long curved claws with shorter claws on the back feet.

His diet, depending on his location, consists of the inner bark of pine and juniper trees in the higher altitudes, mesquite beans, low shrubs, such as Mormon tea and jojoba and grass in the lower altitudes.

Also, he will eat bark from mesquite and ironwood trees. In the north, he has even been known to eat axe handles, harnesses and the tops of kitchen tables! He is evidently seeking out the salt they contain.

Getting back to those notorious quills that protect the porcupine, the quills, contrary to popular opinion, are not thrown, but like cholla, are loosened by slight touch from an unusual person.

These needle-sharp quills can easily be imbedded in flesh since each quill has innumerable barbs

near the points and are not easily removed.

They will eventually work further into the flesh unless cut and removed with a sharp jerk.

Mountain lions have acquired an instinctive skill in attacking a porcupine.

They are able to quickly flip one over on its back since the underside or front does not have quills.

Porcupines can thwart their enemies, such as coyotes, bobcats, fishers and bears by taking a defensive crouch with their head tucked under the front legs while keeping its back toward the enemy.

The flailing tail releases quills on contact.

The porcupine resembles an awkward near-sighted bear in many of his actions.

He has a slow waddling gait, and because of his poor eyesight, will select food by smell or touch using the front feet.

He's a noisy eater, smacking his lips and drinking like a horse, in large gulps.

His living quarters are in semi-permanent dens in rocks on a ridge.

The young are born in the spring. They average about 1 pound in weight and already have incisors when born. The quills are soft but only for a brief period. They harden in several hours for immediate protection.

Within two months, the young are fully weaned and are able to find their own food. Later, they climb trees and complain in a high voice if disturbed.

It's interesting to note that the porcupine is thought to have come from South America after the last Ice Age and that they are all the same species with only slight differences due to environmental conditions.

Since they are found mostly in eastern Arizona, a sighting of one here in our desert lowlands could be most welcome news.