

2.10 Porcupine (*Erethizon dorsatum*: ssp: *myops*, *nigrescens*)

Appearance and Size

Porcupines have a short, stocky body. They have a short, blunt-nosed face with small eyes. The ears are small and round, almost concealed by the hair, which also covers the spines. The shoulders are humped, making the back look arched. The short legs are bowed, and the



(Photo: US National Park Service)

animal stands bear-like with its entire foot planted firmly on the ground. The claws are long and curved. The muscular tail is thick, short, and rounded at the tip.

The porcupine's coat consists of a soft, brown, woolly undercoat and coarse, long guard hairs. At the base, each guard hair is brown, becoming darker near the tip, which may be white in eastern populations and

yellow in the western ones. The guard hairs conceal the quills until the porcupine is aroused. The quills are longest on the back and tail and when raised push the guard hairs forward, forming a crest. On the face the quills are about 1.2 cm long; on the back they may be up to 12.5 cm in length. There are no quills on the muzzle, legs, or underparts of the body. Next to the beaver, the porcupine is Canada's second largest rodent. Adult males reach an average weight of 5.5 kg after six years; the females reach 4.5 kg. The total length averages 68 cm to 100 cm, and the height at the shoulders is about 30 cm.

Life History

Porcupines are solitary animals. Porcupines first breed when they are one or two years old. In the southern part of their range, they mate in September. In the more northerly latitudes, they mate in late October to November. The gestation period is about 7 to 8 months. Birth occurs sometime between March and May depending how far north the porcupine is located. Single births are most common and twins are almost unknown. After a couple of days, the baby porcupine can climb, although it tends to spend more time on the ground. After a week or so, the female leaves the baby for



(Photo: Tom Hall)



(Photo: US National Park Service)



(Stock Photo)



longer and longer periods while she feeds on the emerging green plants. Weaning, or making the transition from mother's milk to other food, takes seven to ten days. By the Fall, most young porcupines live apart from their mothers.

Abundance and Distribution

Except for Vancouver Island, the Gulf Islands, and the Queen Charlotte Islands, Porcupines can be found throughout British Columbia. (Map 2.10)

Text and map adapted from: Canadian Wildlife Service, 1993a.



(Photo: Mary Meagher, US National Park Service)



Adapted from: McDougall (1997); and Sheldon and Hartson (1999).



(Photo: Betsy Ely, courtesy of Pasty Central)

Characteristic Features



(Photo: Leonard Sielecki, BCMoT)



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Map 2.10

