

Porcupine Paths

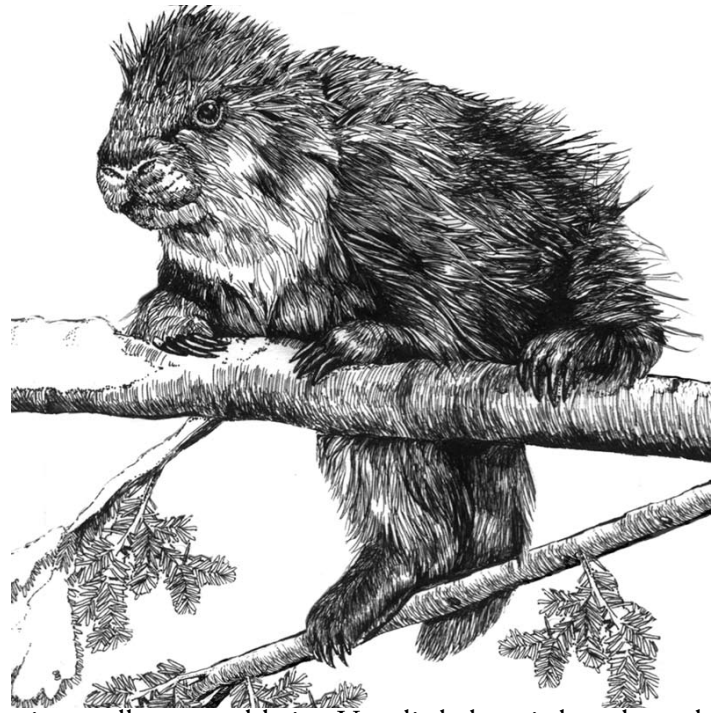
I love winter for many reasons, perhaps the least noble of which is that it satisfies my curiosity about the everyday goings on in my neighborhood. Snow becomes a page upon which each detail in the lives of earthbound creatures is recorded—every tryst, every nap, every pause to scratch.

Most snow stories are written by the energetic creatures we expect to be active all winter, like foxes, snowshoe hares, and squirrels. We expect the slow animals to spend most of the winter sleeping. There is one creature that refuses to conform to this stereotype; the corpulent “quill pig” waddles blithely through whatever winter dishes up.

To find a porcupine trail, strap on your snowshoes and head to almost any location that combines rocky terrain and hemlock trees. These elements rarely occur together without at least one resident porcupine. Look for a trough about ten inches wide that has been traveled repeatedly. Once you have found such a trail, you can be reasonably confident that the animal that made it is within 300 feet of you. By following the trail in one direction you will find the tree (or trees) where the porcupine feeds. In the other direction you will find the porcupine’s sleeping quarters.

Porcupines subsist on a winter food that is high in quantity, but low in quality, the inner bark and small twigs of trees. I see them most often in hemlocks, though sugar maple, beech and aspen are considered palatable, too. This high fiber diet is slow to digest, so there is a limit to the number of calories a porcupine can acquire. Surviving winter is a matter of careful economy. In the sub-zero temperatures we had last week, porcupines must increase their metabolism to stay warm. For this they depend upon fat accumulated in the summer and fall, and hope there’s enough to make it through cold times.

When I follow porcupine trails to their dens, I typically find they’ve selected the base of a hollow tree or an overhanging rocky ledge, but almost any space that provides some shelter from the elements and protects their vulnerable parts from predators will do. Nose-in to a rocky nook might seem like a frigid place for a winter nap, but if you were to remove the quills from a porcupine you would find a very dense undercoat and long, snow-and-



rain-repellent guard hairs. Very little heat is lost through a porcupine’s coat.

Even uninhabited dens can be recognized readily. Porcupines are one of the few creatures with indoor bathrooms, though they lack the benefit of plumbing. While a mountain of droppings might look messy, by the time a porcupine has finished digesting the remains are compact crescents of sawdust and might be one of nature’s better beddings.

I’ll admit that the snow diary entries of a porcupine usually describe a life of tedious routine, but winter is the slow season for porcupines. During the summer and fall the sphere of porcupine life expands.

In the spring female porcupines give birth to a single “porcupette.” I once had a chance to interact with a baby porcupine while visiting a wildlife vet. While too prickly to pet, “Quilly” could compete with any wild baby in scampering, hopping in the air, and tail chasing competitions.

More recently, a mother and baby porcupine summered in a basswood tree near my house. They often fed on low branches within easy viewing range. I spent more time than I care to admit lounging beneath that tree watching the porcupines’ leisurely activities and listening to their porcupine talk.

The talk between mother and young is varied and mild, the conversations that take place between adults is any-

thing but. One autumn night I was awakened by a series of piercing shrieks. The source puzzled me only briefly since I was close enough to hear that each shriek was punctuated by the sliding whine that is characteristic of porcupine talk. Sleeping through the din was not an option, so I crawled out of my tent and went to see what the fuss was about. The two porcupines sat next to each other on a branch at about my eye-level. From their activities I judged that one felt amorous, while the other insisted that she(?) was not in the mood.

I have since learned that this is typical of the porcupine mating season. Female porcupines send out olfactory signals that let males know they will be interested in mating, "oh, sometime in the next week." This gives the males time to assemble and determine which will be the father of the next season's baby. This past fall squeals, shrieks and whines were a part of the nocturnal music for a couple

of weeks as a female porcupine and at least one or two very large suitors dined on apples on the tree outside my window.

Occasionally people call BEEC to describe a scream they heard in the woods, imagining it must have been the mating call of a fisher or some poor creature meeting a terrible end. When I give an imitation of a porcupine shriek, many such sounds turn out to have been merely disgruntled porcupines.

I hate to miss a day outside when it's snowy. I'm heading out on my skis right now. I know where there's a rocky hillside with plenty of hemlocks. On the way I expect I'll see what hare, weasel, and fox have been up to. When I get to the ledges I'm hoping to find that at least one porcupine weathered the frosty nights. Maybe she won't complain about a short visit if I bring along an apple.