

Nature Week at Heritage Village - August 23rd

Porcupine

Chinks eaten from the artifact building, almost the entire seat gnawed from the outhouse - our vandal is the resident porcupine. Where are these delinquents and why do they deface our buildings?

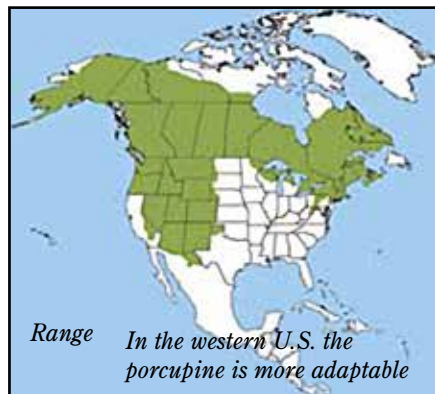


Porcupines are mostly nocturnal, preferring to eat at dusk and dawn up in thick trees and out of sight. The BioKIDS web site explains their diet. "In the spring, porcupines eat the buds of sugar maple trees, which are a rich source of protein. As soon as the leaves flush out, the sugar maple is

abandoned because the leaves contain high amounts of tannins (chemicals toxic to porcupines). Porcupines begin to eat the cambium of basswood, aspen, and sapling beech trees. These contain a lot of protein and only a little tannin. Also ash trees are fed upon heavily, because they are relatively easy to climb (compared to the smooth bark of beeches), and because they have relatively low tannin levels. In the autumn when oak acorns and beech nuts become available, porcupines begin to feed on these. Porcupines are best at getting these nuts out of trees, and after the nuts have fallen to the ground, most of them are eaten by deer and squirrels. Winter foraging is focused on the phloem of hemlock and sugar maple trees. Other foods utilized by porcupines include raspberry stems, grasses,

flowering herbs, and a large amount of apples. Herbivory has an effect on the sodium metabolism of porcupines, which results in a lust for salt. Porcupines will chew on the wooden handles of human tools, other human-made wood structures, and areas of collected roadside salt runoff."

Their lust for salt causes them to chew on plywood, because the binding resin contains sodium, and on outhouses, because urine leaves a salt residue. Heritage Village is vast enough to support a few of the solitary porcupines, each needing a territory of 25-35 acres. We now provide them with a winter salt block to deter damage to the buildings. We are at the southern edge of their range which follows the pattern of hemlock distribution, a favorite wintertime tree for both protection in its dense limbs and for food.



At this time of the year porcupines are putting on fat, one of few rodents to do so. (Remember gophers do this too). They will pump up their bodies to 60% fat, compared to the normal rodent with 3-5%. In October and November they mate, giving birth in the spring. During the winter they continue to be active, not going into torpor like the gopher, and continue to eat but the food is low in nutrition and high in toxins.

Of course we also notice porcupine quills, 30,000 4-inch barbed harpoons per adult. These are not launched at hapless hikers but require direct contact. When we were contemplating acquiring the Freedom school we called in historical architect Rick Newmann. We were poking around trying to decide if the building was salvageable when we heard a yelp from Rick. In the thick brush he was impaled by a porky that we had disturbed. This porky had been living in the attic of the school. Fortunately for Rick the quills are naturally coated with antibiotics; an infection from porcupine quills is not likely. Researchers think this is because the porcupine routinely impales himself, particularly when he falls out of trees, an apparently common occurrence.



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Issue #21