

Porcupine

Words to Know

quills

hollow, sharp spines

prairies

mostly flat, grassy lands

keratin

the material human fingernails are made of

Porcupines are rodents like rats and groundhogs. They are famous for their **quills**. They have thousands of them on their backs.

Kinds of Porcupines

Two kinds of porcupines exist. They are Old World porcupines and New World porcupines.

Old World porcupines come from Africa and Asia. They live on the ground.

They cannot climb well. They are good swimmers. They make dens in caves, cracks in rocks, or holes in the ground.

New World porcupines come from North and South America. They live in forests and on mountains and **prairies**.

They are great climbers. They spend most of their lives in trees. They nest in trees, hollow logs, or thick brush.

Diet

Porcupines are gnawing animals. They chew on tree bark, roots, and stems.

Porcupines mainly eat plants. They eat pine needles, fruits and vegetables, berries, and seeds.

Sometimes they eat grubs. These are baby insects.

Porcupines love salt. They will lick the rock salt used to melt ice on roads in winter.

Porcupines are slow runners. They walk with a waddle. They do not need to move very fast. Their quills protect them.

Quills

Porcupine quills are mixed in with their brown or gray fur. They have up to 30,000 quills. A quill is just a special, stiff hair made of **keratin** (CARE-uh-tin).

Old World porcupine quills can grow up to 20 inches long.

New World porcupine quills are shorter. They have a dangerous barb at the tip. The barb is like a fishhook.

It gets stuck in the skin. It is painful to pull out. Wounds from quills can get infected.

A porcupine's quills stand up when the porcupine is excited or in danger. This makes the porcupine look much larger.

The porcupine is good at scaring off enemies. It makes its quills stand up. It points its tail toward the enemy.

Then it shakes its body and growls. Some quills fall off when it shakes. New quills grow back in their place.

The porcupine has two ways to protect itself from its own quills. First, babies have very soft quills. The mother is not hurt during birth. The soft quills do not harden until hours later.

Second, porcupine skin naturally kills germs. A porcupine will not get an infection even if it pokes itself with one of its quills by accident.

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