

# Misfits Rehab provides care for ailing porcupines

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March 27, 2022

AUBURN — Porcupines across New England are being treated for a fungal disease that has proved fatal in numerous cases, according to a recent report in Northern Woodlands magazine.

In New Hampshire, Vermont and Massachusetts, the North American porcupine population has been gripped by an aggressive fungal strain that causes ringworm, resulting in skin lesions that can spread throughout the body, debilitating the animal by covering its eyes and ears and eventually causing death.

In people, ringworm shows as red, irritated skin characterized by a circular appearance. Anyone can contract ringworm and it is treatable with antifungal medications, according to health experts.

To ward off the fungus, porcupines will naturally grow a thick layer of keratin on their skin, the same material in its quills. The fungus, however, thrives on keratin, consuming it and growing stronger and more rapidly.



Paulie the porcupine nibbles on a cookie at Misfits Rehab in Auburn. *Andree Kehn/Sun Journal file*

The fungus is zoonotic, meaning humans are able to contract it, although no cases of infection in humans has been reported, according to experts.

“The pattern of disease caused by this fungus has never been reported in porcupines,” Dr. David Needle, a veterinary pathologist, said in Northern Woodlands.

In the same story, a study of porcupine mortality in Maine, New Hampshire and Massachusetts led pathologists at the New Hampshire Veterinary Diagnostic Laboratory in Durham to examine 44 dead porcupines over seven years. They found 12 had died from a disease caused by a fungus known to cause ringworm in wild and domestic animals.

Misfits Rehab, an animal care facility at 850 Garfield Road in Auburn, specializes in rehabilitation of injured and sick wildlife. It has been combatting the spread of skin fungus in Maine’s porcupines. The facility combats the fungus using a combination of oral medication and sulfur dips, which are also used on dogs with ringworm or mange, a contagious skin disease caused by mites.

“We see it all the time and we treat it all the time,” said Jennifer Marchigiani, a wildlife rehabilitator who has treated dozens of porcupines since joining Misfits Rehab in 2002. “It’s definitely a difficult thing to treat in one aspect because (the fungus) is resistant to a lot of things, but that little combination seems to work really well.

“The (sulfur dip) is sometimes more resistant, so you have to treat it both internally and externally. If you’re just doing the oral, you’re still leaving the outside of the skin to potentially have damage. So by treating both at the same time, it makes sure that you’re getting it at both ends. Giving it a double whammy definitely helps.”

Along with treating the infection, Misfits also nurses the porcupines through the recovery process, which can last four months.

“It takes a long time (to recover) because once you get rid of the fungus, then the skin has to regenerate. The fur has to regrow and so do the quills,” said Marchigiani, adding there is no known explanation for why porcupines are predisposed to getting the fungus.

Misfits Rehab treated nine cases of porcupine fungal infections in 2021, which is about typical for a year, according to Marchigiani. She said the majority of cases occur during winter, and after an animal is fully rehabilitated, Marchigiani releases it.

“Once they’re fully recovered and they have their coat back and the weather’s good, then they definitely go back out in the wild,” she said. “We do get people that bring them to us and, of course, being a porcupine, some people are scared of them. So we will go and get those.”

Experts say anyone who encounters an afflicted porcupine should call the Maine Department of Inland Fisheries & Wildlife at 207-287-8000.

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