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While there are more than two dozen kinds of porcupines across the globe, the North American porcupine is the only species that lives in Canada. It is Ontario's second largest rodent, trumped only by the beaver. The porcupine lives in mixed forests. It does not hibernate, and depending on the season, eats a variety of twigs, bark, leaves, fruit, flowers, grasses and clover.

The porcupine actually has soft hair, but its back, sides and tail are covered with more than 30,000 sharp quills. The hollow quills are barbed, which makes them tough to remove when they become stuck in an assailant's skin. Once under the skin, they expand, making extraction even more difficult. Being nearsighted and slow moving, the porcupine relies on these sharp spines for protection. Contrary to popular belief, it cannot throw its quills, though they will detach quite easily if touched. When threatened, it abruptly raises its quills and keeps its tail and back facing the threat. If further provoked, it lowers its head (the quills there are more like hair and offer no protection) and thrashes its spiked tail, hoping to contact the attacker. New quills grow in to replace any lost ones. Both wild and domestic assailants often leave such confrontations as literal sore losers, with quills jutting from their noses, paws or elsewhere. We reasonably assume that our dogs will learn a lesson from an introductory scrap with a "prickle pig." However, having talked to several people whose dogs continue to attack porcupines, this is not always the case. The vet bills can add up for repeat offenders, and whether advisable or not, some folks get pretty handy with their junk drawer pliers.

Some natural predators – including lynx, bobcats, wolves, coyotes, bears and great horned owls -- may successfully kill a porcupine by biting its vulnerable head or neck. Nevertheless, they still risk injury and, in severe cases, death from blood loss or infection. One predator in particular is an expert porcupine assassin and really helps to keep its population under control. The powerful fisher is built low slung and is nimble enough to avoid the porcupine's tail. It does not flip the porcupine over, as was once believed, but repeatedly strikes its face, causing excessive blood loss and shock. Only when the porcupine is immobilized does the fisher turn it over to feed on the undersides.

Despite the DO NOT CUDDLE attributes of the porcupine, love always finds a way. Procreation of the species is ensured when, during a very brief 12-hour window of time each fall, the female is receptive and breeding occurs. Following a 30-week gestation, a single baby, called a "porcupette," is born in the spring. Its quills are soft at birth (whew!) but harden within a few hours.

In order to keep its large front teeth honed and healthy, the porcupine is driven to chew. Unfortunately, its lust for wood, as well as salt, leads it to temptation, resulting in damage to our personal property: backyard trees girdled, canoe paddles, axe handles and leather harnesses chewed up, sheds and outhouses gnawed on and plastic plumbing pipes ruined. Porkies have even been known to chomp road salt-splashed automobile brake hoses. Humans reciprocate by shooting and trapping porcupines, and many are killed by automobiles as they amble across our roadways.

In parting, here is a quirky fact. Despite being naturally arboreal, the porcupine sometimes falls from its tree and sustains broken bones and, ironically, stabbing injuries from its own quills.

Margie is a self-proclaimed nature nerd with a passion for all things finned, furred and feathered...even the creepy-crawly-scaly kinds. She's summured on Wolfe Lake since childhood and loves sharing what she learns about our wild things.