



MILDLIFE NOTES

Porcupine

Erethizon dorsatum

She is obese, bowlegged, and pigeon-toed. She is also myopic, antisocial and can scream like a wildcat. Your worst nightmare? No, a porcupine.

Porcupines occur throughout New Mexico. "Porky" is the second largest North American rodent; only the beaver is larger. Weighing in at 10 to 25 pounds, the porcupine has a small face, a thick body and a short, clublike tail. It is famous for its hairs, which have been modified into quills.

Folklore is so full of quill tales that one would think a porcupine could challenge an Olympic javelin thrower when it comes to flinging pointed spears. The porcupine, alas, does nothing so spectacular. Quills are never thrown; respect for them stems from their design. The sharp end of a quill is covered with shingle-lapped barbs. When a quill is embedded in tissue, the small barbs expand. As the muscle fibers of the victim contract, the quill is pulled deeper into the tissue.

One then has to wonder how the world acquires young porcupines when the adults are so formidably armored.

Breeding occurs in the fall, accompanied by high-pitched screams from fighting males and nonreceptive females. Battles

have been observed in which both combatants incurred vicious bites and hundreds of quills. A porcupine will meticulously remove a foreign quill, using its incisors and dexterous forefeet, but battles between porcupines can be fatal.

The female bears one pup in the spring. The quills are soft at birth, but they dry and harden quickly and are soon functional. The pup adds vegetation to its diet at about a week after birth, but probably continues to nurse through the summer.

The summer diet consists primarily of grasses, forbs, and aquatic plants. In the winter the porcupine switches to the inner bark of conifers and hardwoods. Apple and cherry orchards can be severely damaged by porcupines. Because porcupines also are attracted by plywood bonding glue, destruction of plywood signs and structures can ensue. Their preference for salt leads them to chew seat covers, backpacks, and axe handles that have absorbed perspiration.

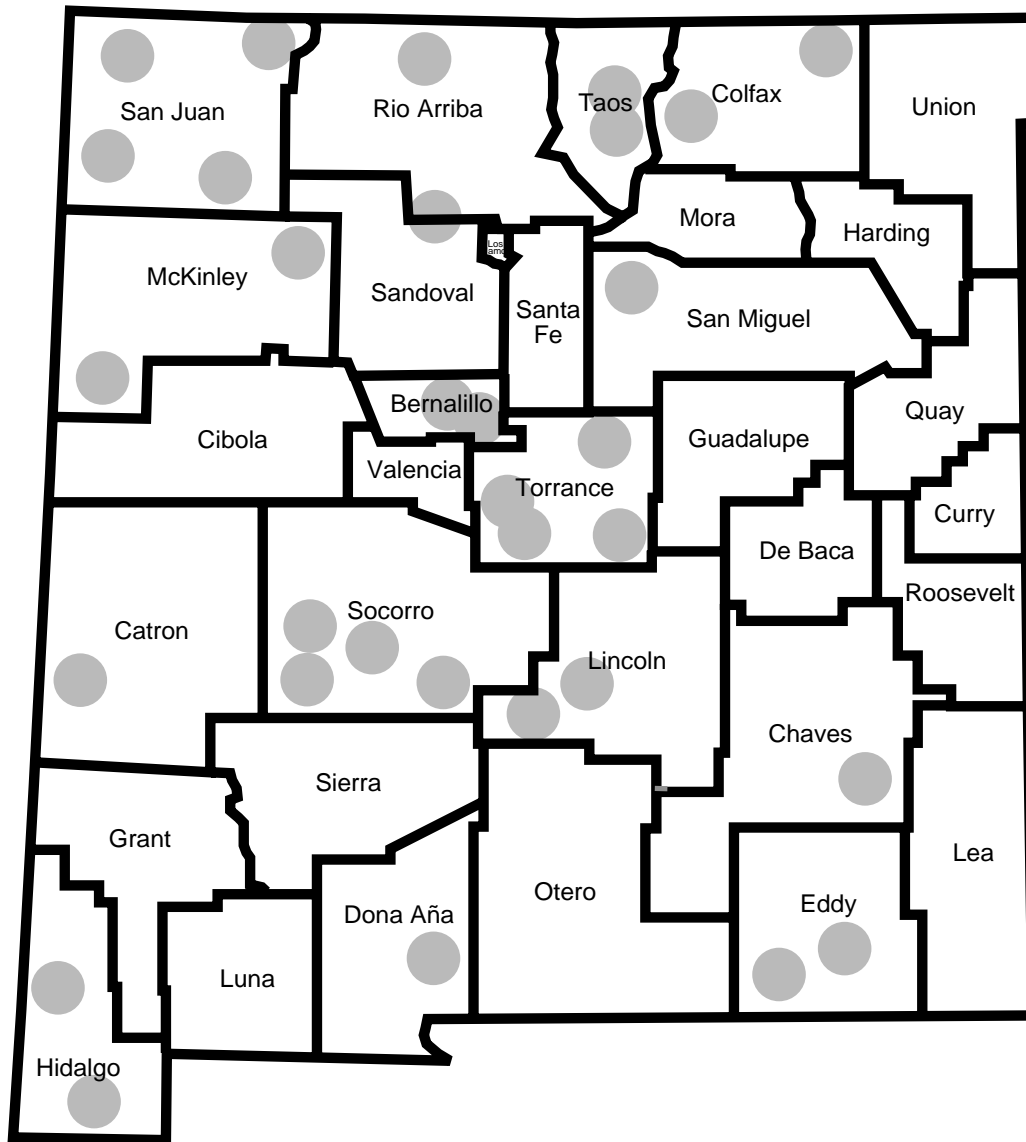
Some states have introduced the fisher (marten) in areas with porcupine problems. The fisher will slash and harass the face of a



porcupine until the victim is helpless.

Fishers eat the carcass but leave the skin.

The pugnacious porcupine has only one other effective predator, and that is man. It is neither the rifle nor the trap that takes many porcupines. It is the lure of road salt: A pigeon-toed fat body is not adept at dodging cars.



Shaded dots indicate areas where porcupines have been located.

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