

OUTDOORS

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The armadillo has not quite made it to Colorado yet. Climate change and other factors may bring this little guy to our state. (Photo by Mark Rackay)

Armadillos in Colorado

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I was up in a tree stand, some 25 feet above the ground in Alabama, hoping a whitetail buck would come strolling past. Hunting whitetail deer in the Southern States is a definite patience game, something I am always lacking in.

Nonetheless, I was putting in my time-some 9 hours a day.

This particular evening, I kept hearing something rustling leaves, digging, scratching, and generally disturbing the peace in my general vicinity.

I was thinking it may be an incoming hog, since no self-respecting deer would make so much noise. Realize that my hearing is so bad, I would probably sleep through a thermal nuclear explosion.

After several minutes, I finally put eyes on the interloper that was making enough noise to wake the dead.

Turned out that he was neither a deer nor a hog, but a tiny little, odd looking, dinosaur like creature.

He was nosing into the soft ground, probably searching for a meal, all the while digging with clawed feet, throwing dirt, leaves and small twigs in every direction.

Stealth was definitely not his style.

The critter was an armadillo; very common in the southern states. In case you are wondering why I am writing about them here; it is because they are working their way into Colorado.

There have only been a



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

handful of reported sightings so far, but we should expect to see them in increasing numbers very soon.

There are some 21 species of armadillos across the Americas.

The size of them ranges from the pink fairy armadillo, which is about 6 inches long, all the way up to the Giant armadillo who can exceed 5 feet in length and weigh over 150 pounds.

The name armadillo means "little armored ones" in Spanish.

All of the armadillo species originate from South America, but only the nine banded armadillos (*Dasypus novemcinctus*) in case you wondered what the scientific name was) has made it far enough north to reach the United States.

If you are a southerner from states like Alabama, Mississippi, Florida or Georgia, you are very used to seeing them rooting around your backyard.

Texas has so many of them they are the official state animal.

These creatures have fascinating outer shells that cover their body to protect them from predators. A common misconception is that the nine

banded armadillos can roll up into a ball.

Only two species can roll up that way, and they both live only in South America. The main predators of armadillos include mountain lions, black bears and alligators.

The nine banded armadillos can reach a length of about 2.5 feet in length and top the scales at 12 pounds.

They prefer warm, wet climates and live in forested or grassland habitats. Water does not create an obstacle for these critters as they can hold their breath for 6 minutes, and actually walk along the bottom of a stream or river.

Armadillo are a distant relative to the tree sloth and anteater, and like them, have one of the slowest basal metabolic rates of all mammals.

Because of this biological trait, armadillos are a common carrier for the bacteria that causes leprosy, so you probably don't want to get cuddly with one should you have the opportunity, and you certainly don't want to eat one.

People do eat armadillos and have for a long time. They have been nicknamed "poor man's pork" and the "Hoover hog" by people who blamed President Hoover for the Great Depression.

Before you blame the armadillo for leprosy, know that the disease was brought to this continent by Europeans in the 15th century.

The poor armadillo contracted the disease from us and

because of their slow metabolic rate, they are a natural carrier of the disease.

As a nocturnal animal, the armadillo does most of his foraging, eating, digging, and mating at night.

During the daylight hours, which can last a long time depending on the time of year, they spend the time snoozing in their burrows. They can sleep as much as 18 hours a day.

Does not sound like a bad lifestyle actually.

Armadillos are generalist feeders and use their sense of smell to track down over 500 different foods. Their favorite are the invertebrates (such as beetles), cockroaches, fire ants, spiders, snails, and grubs.

They will, on occasion, eat small reptiles as well as eggs of mammals, reptiles and birds. About 10 percent of their diet is made up of fruit or plant matter. I guess they hate vegetables as much as I do.

Nine banded armadillos almost always give birth to four identical quadruplets. That's four young from a single fertilized egg. The newborns begin walking their first day.

In the wild, these critters can reach 20 years of age. At birth, the armor has not yet hardened, making the young very vulnerable to predators.

Generally, these critters live in the Southeastern states, but their range has been expanding continually northward for the last 100 years. A few have been spotted as far north as Illinois and Nebraska.

Armadillos have not yet reached the full extent of their possible range, which one study has predicted may reach as far north as Massachusetts. Climate change caused by increasing carbon in the atmosphere may expand their range.

Be ever alert for armadillos in Colorado, especially the Eastern plains and the Southeast corner of the state. My guess is the Arkansas River Valley may turn them up in the future. Any sightings should be reported to the Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

I enjoyed seeing them in Florida and Alabama, finding them to be both humorous and fascinating at the same time. The little guy under my tree stand kept me entertained until nightfall. He was probably more fun than the whitetail buck that never showed up that evening.

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