

# The mighty ‘quill pig’



## Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay

The breaking of dawn found me a thousand miles northwest of nowhere, walking around a water hole near the Save River, in Zimbabwe. We were looking for tracks of a bull Kudu, a non-existent animal, or so it seemed, today marking the 8th day of hunting for one with no success.

I found a porcupine quill, about 12 inches long, and black and white striped. Our tracker, Pardon, told me of a Shona belief that finding a quill on a hunt brings good luck, and I must keep it. I put the quill in my pack. Later that morning, I collected a monster kudu bull.

The word porcupine means “quill pig” in Latin, however porcupines are large rodents and have no relation to pigs. An African porcupine is much larger than their American cousins, topping out at 65 pounds, and reaching 37 inches in length.

The quills of an African porcupine can reach over 15 inches and have long been a favorite ornament and good luck charm in most of Africa. The hollow rattle quills serve as musical instruments and were once used as containers for gold dust.

Closer to home, the porcupine is the 2nd largest rodent in North America, behind the beaver. Like all rodents, porcupines’ front incisors grow continuously throughout its lifetime, as their teeth wear away chewing tree bark. They are one of the longest living rodents, sometimes making it over 20 years in the wild. One individual, named Cooper, lived to 32 years of age.

The porcupine that lives in Colorado, is part of a family known as New World porcupines. He can be found in the phone book under his Latin name, *Erethizon dorsatum*, but on the streets he will answer to quill pig. Worldwide, there are 30 species of porcupine.

The quill pig tops



This is the North American porcupine. Notice the quills are much shorter than his African cousin. (Photo courtesy of USFWS)

the scales at around 15 pounds, though males with a healthy diet can grow significantly larger. They are found primarily in the western half of the U.S., most of Canada, some Midwest, and Northwest States. He is doing quite well, listed as an animal of “least concern.”

The identifying feature of a porcupine is his quills, which are hollow and sharp enough you can figure your taxes with one. The quills have a barb at the end, causing them to imbed in the skin of whatever decides to fight him. The quills are actually individual hairs, and an adult porcupine can have as many as 30,000 of them, with some reaching 4 inches or more in length. He grows new quills to replace the ones lost.

The porcupine of North America has a natural antibiotic coating on their quills in case they accidentally poke themselves. They also have an olfactory warning released from them in a chemical compound called R-delta-decalactone, which creates a unique and pungent scent that lets you know he’s about to strike.

It is a false rumor that a porcupine can shoot his quills at a predator, but the quills do become detached when touched. He can swish his tail super-fast, which can serve the same purpose to an enemy. The quills will also stand up when the porcupine feels threatened, making him appear much larger.



These are quills from the African porcupine, thought to bring good luck to anyone who finds them. (Photo/Mark Rackay)

A newborn porcupette is called a porcupette and has a full set of quills at birth. They are soft at birth, which is good news for the mother, but the quills begin to harden within an hour after birth.

Growing up, there was a neighbor kid who was several years younger than me. He was not known as a kid who took direction well. One day, he and I were hiking around in the woods near our house when we came across a baby porcupine. He appeared cuddly enough and very much unafraid. I was happy to leave the porcupette alone, but my associate thought he

would try and hold it.

After about a 5 second encounter with the creature, my friend looked like an advertisement for band aids and mercurochrome, with dozens of quills sticking out of his hands and forearms. I found the event to be quite comical, but he was clearly not amused. He survived the incident, much to the good luck of his future creditors, but had a time when his mother had to pull those barbed quills out of his hide. Good thing there was a natural antibiotic on the quills.

Porcupines are mostly solitary animals, and nocturnal, which is why we rarely see them in

the wild. With their long claws, they are great tree climbers. The North American species are the only ones who can climb trees well, the others are mostly happy keeping all 4 feet on the ground.

During the summer, they eat tree twigs, leaves, and green plants, but during the winter, they survive on tree bark and dried grasses. The porcupine does not hibernate, but they do den up in caves, hollow logs, or dense brush piles, during harsh weather.

Africa is the only place I have ever found a porcupine quill, and it brought this hunter good luck with a kudu. If I could find a quill when

I am up on my elk hunt, maybe I would have better luck.

Mark Rackay is a columnist for the Montrose Daily Press, Delta County Independent, and several other newspapers, as well as a feature writer for several saltwater fishing magazines. He is an avid hunter and world class saltwater angler, who travels around the world in search of adventure and serves as a Director and Public Information Officer for the Montrose County Sheriff’s Posse.

Personal email is [elkhunter77@icloud.com](mailto:elkhunter77@icloud.com) For information about the Posse call 970-765-7033 (leave a message) or email [info@mcspi.org](mailto:info@mcspi.org)



10 SOUTH SELIG AVE MONTROSE, COLORADO 81401 970-249-4226