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NEW THREAT TO AREA DOGS

This column is about a new discovery in Saline County since I have lived and worked here (23 years). Gary Lothrop, DVM in Crete, has recently treated three dogs to remove porcupine quills. That's right, porcupine quill injury. Pretty unusual for our area but on the other hand, mountain lions used to be unusual too. The area of the county with the injury to dogs is in the northern part of Saline County near the Blue River Church area or the old Midland By-Products cutoff road to Milford. Two dogs were treated about four weeks ago. One dog was treated two weeks ago about 1/4 mile away from the first incidence. All three dogs had about 100 quills removed.

Imagine having 15 quills one-half the size of a toothpick imbedded three-fourth inch deep in your mouth. One of the dogs couldn't eat and would have died. The porcupine's defense mechanism is different than other wild animals because they rely on their sharp, barbed quills (up to 30,000 per individual) for defense.

Porcupines (*Erethizon dorsatum*) sometimes called "porkies" or "quill pigs" are heavy-bodied, short legged, slow, and awkward rodents with a waddling gait. Adults are typically 25 to 30 inches long and weigh 10 to 30 pounds.

Why would a porcupine that is a common resident of the coniferous forests of western and northern, North America be in Saline County Nebraska? One theory is drought forces animals to new territories. The very eastern range of the porcupine in the U.S. is typically New Mexico, Colorado, Wyoming and Montana. However, the western edge of Nebraska can be considered in the normal range of the porcupine. The porcupine wanders widely and is found from cottonwood stands along prairie river bottoms and deserts to alpine tundra. We are over 400 miles from the eastern edge of the normal range reported in the literature.

Porcupines eat herbaceous plants, inner tree bark, twigs and leaves with an apparent preference for ponderosa pine, aspen, willow and cottonwood. Trees with thin, smooth bark are preferred over those with thick, rough bark. Porcupine feeding is frequently evident and has considerable impact on the cottonwood stands of western river bottoms. They occasionally will cause considerable losses by damaging fruits, sweet corn, alfalfa, and small grains. They chew on hand tools and other wood objects while seeking salt. They can destroy siding on cabins when seeking plywood resins.

The biggest threat of porcupines is to dogs, which never seem to learn to avoid them. Domestic stock occasionally will nuzzle a porcupine and may be fatally injured if quills are not removed promptly.

If there is a pair in Saline County, porcupines breed in Autumn and after a 7 month gestation period, usually produce one offspring. Western U.S. predators include coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, black bears, fishers, martens, great horned owls, and others. Porcupines are active year around and primarily are nocturnal often resting in trees during the day. They favor caves, rock slides and thick timber downfalls for shelter.



Now here is an idea for the Saline Center wild game feed this year. Porcupines are not protected. They are edible and have been used by humans as an emergency food. On the other hand, porcupines are easily photographed in the wild and enjoyed by nature lovers. A porcupine in Saline County brought new business to a local veterinarian, that quite frankly was a big surprise.

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