The prickly little myths behind porcupines

Rodent's facts more fascinating than fiction

Most mammals in our region are extremely difficult to find. Not only are they nocturnal, but their dens are in remote, secret, inaccessible places with few — if any — clues left to their whereabouts.

Not so the porcupine.

This big, slow-moving rodent is one of the easiest mammals to find. It's trails in the snow are unlike those of any other animal — flat-footed, pigeon-toed, five-clawed prints that follow a rut created by the short-legged porcupine's squat, low-slung body.

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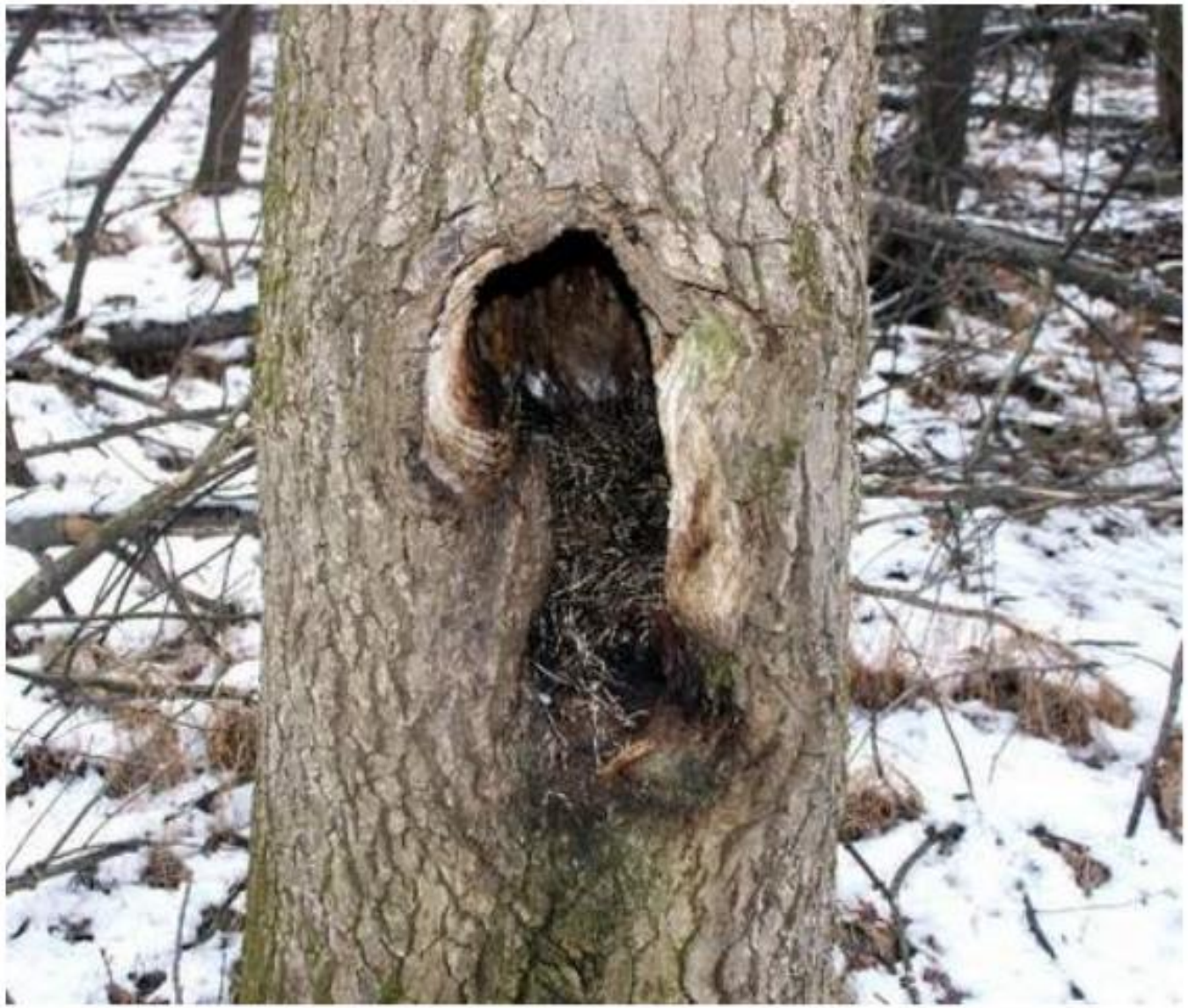
The trails lead straight to (or from) the animal's den or feeding tree. The majority of porcupine dens are inside small caves or narrow passageways among rock outcrops and ledges. The entrance to such a den is usually littered with piles of droppings that resemble elongated deer droppings. Sometimes all it takes is a look inside the rock den to see the quilled rodent sleeping in the darkness.



Porcupines often find homes in dens such as rock crevices and tree cavities. An entrance lined with quills and droppings is a tell-tale sign that a porky is living inside.

Quills are modified hairs coated with thick plates of keratin!

The quills are such a distinctive and unique feature of a porcupine that almost everyone recognizes it. Nevertheless, few people know anything else about it: the fact that a female screams loudly like a cat in a tree in order to attract a male in late summer; that males seriously fight each other during this one-month breeding season

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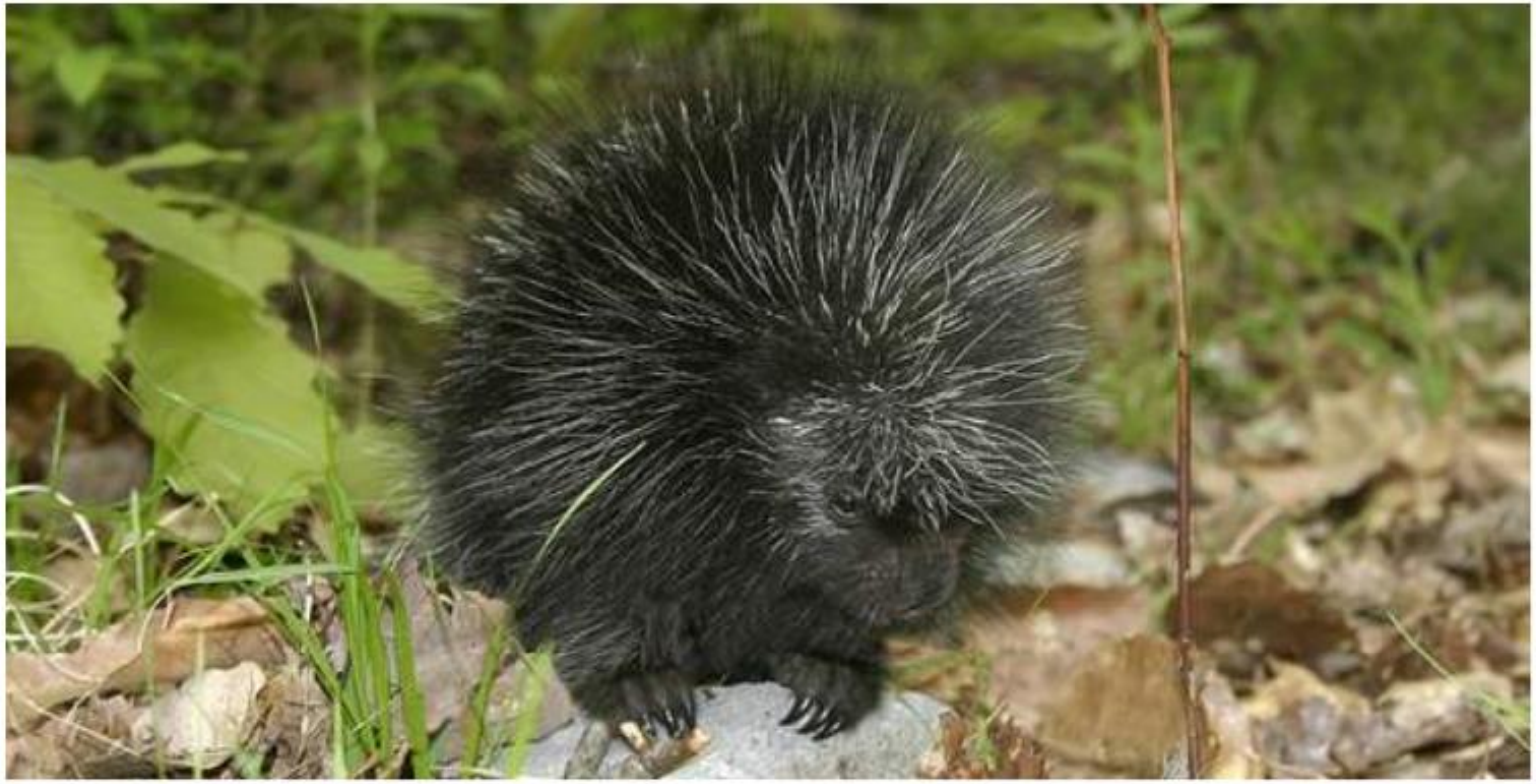
that a single baby (a "porcupette") is born — our only mammal, other than a few species of bats, to have just one offspring per year; and that, in response to being attacked, a porcupine will secrete a distinctive, pungent odor from a patch of skin on its lower back as a warning, before using its main weapons.

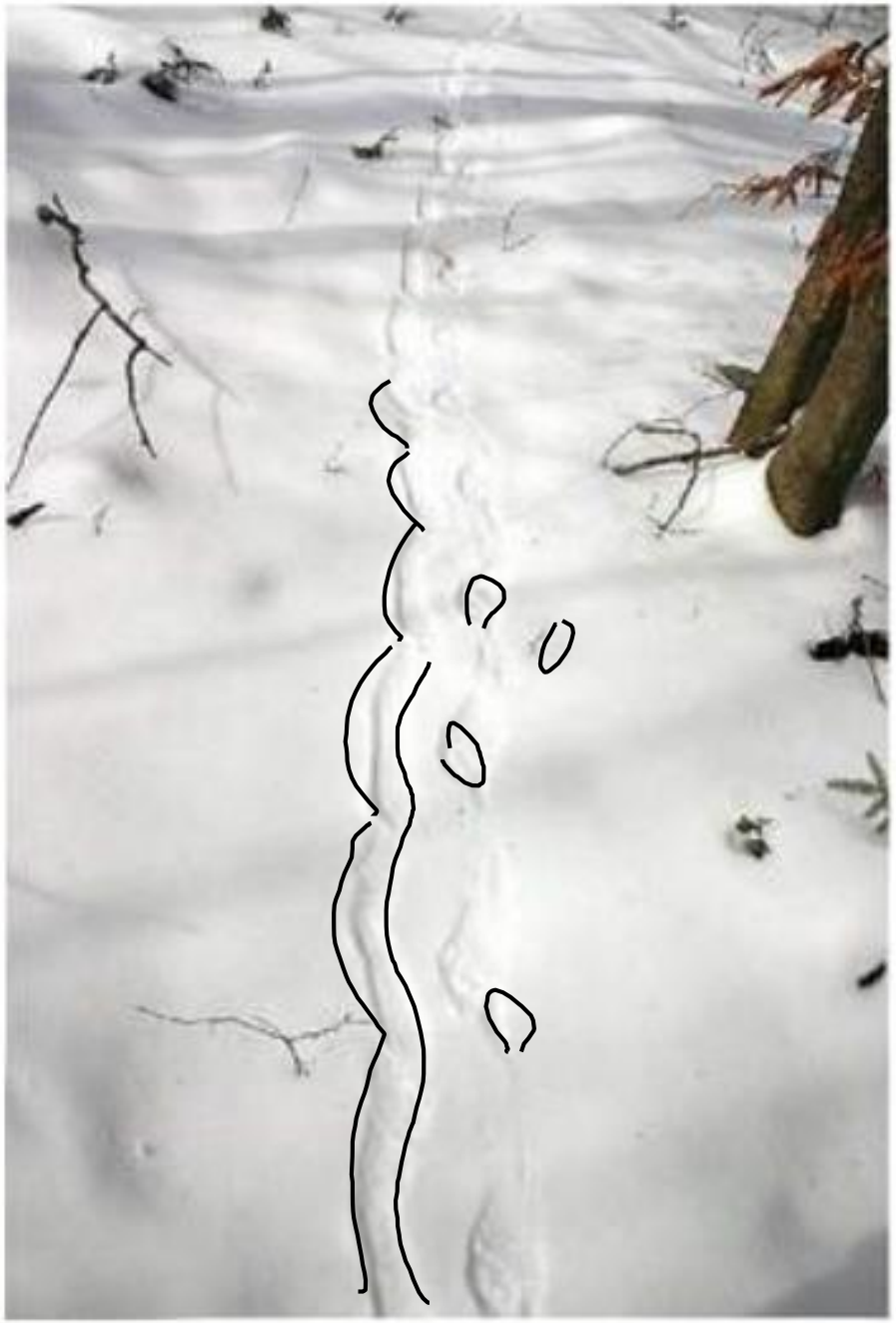
The notion of a porcupine throwing its quills is just a myth. A quill has to make contact with something — a careless human's arm, a curious dog's face — in order to come loose from the porcupine's skin. When its sharp tip is forced into or against another object, the quill loosens its contact with the porcupine's skin at its base and then pulls out easily. Tiny barbs at its tip cause it to be drawn into the skin of an attacker very slowly.

At first the quills can be withdrawn by simply pulling them back out. It's a bit painful but not difficult — I've been quilled several times, including once 40 feet up in a tree while photographing a porcupine. However, if the quills are left in the skin, they'll gradually work their way inside and may penetrate vital organs. Fortunately, porcupine quills are coated with an antibiotic chemical which prevents the animal (and humans) from getting infected if they stick themselves.

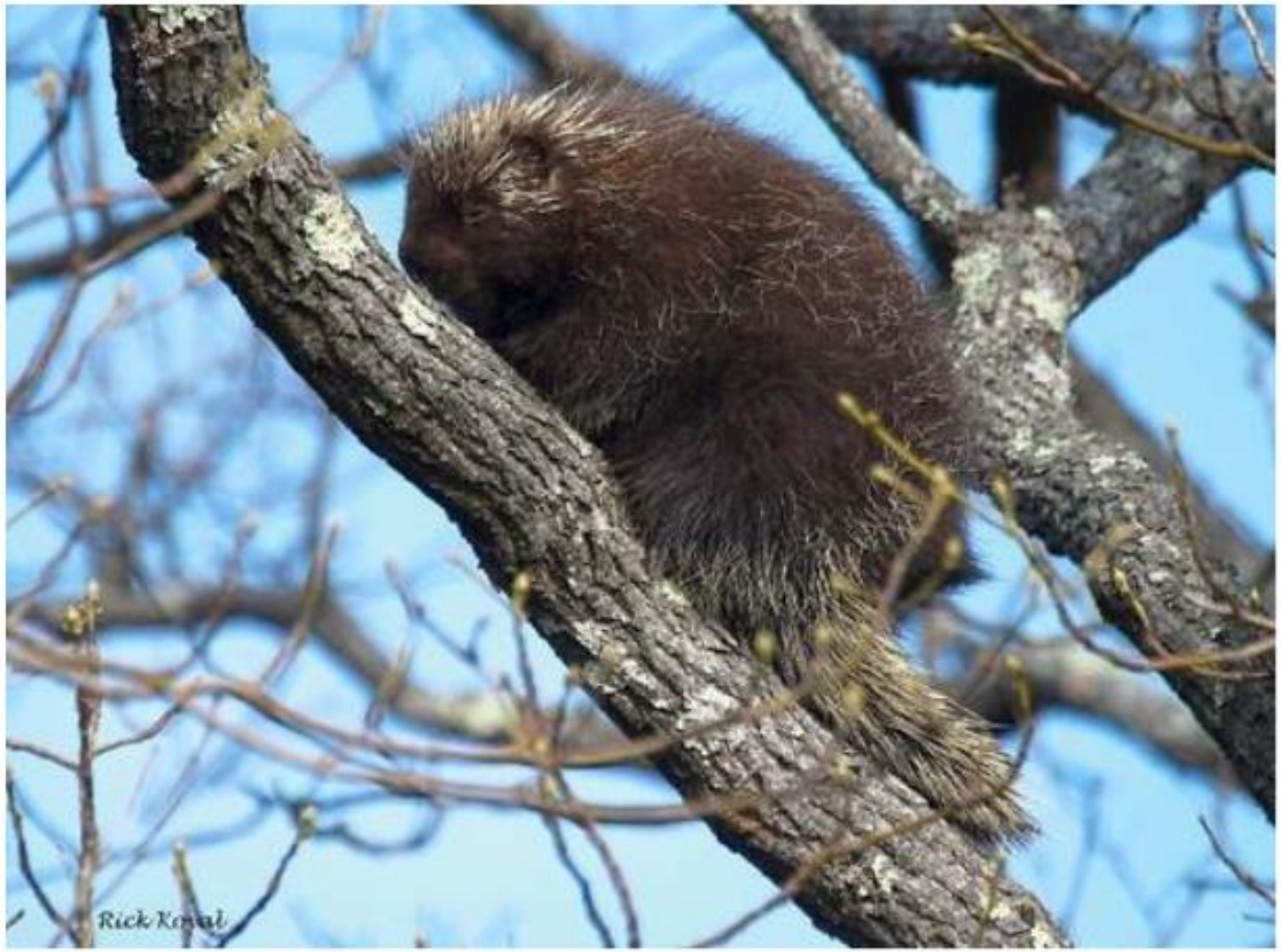
This winter, try to find signs of porcupines — or the animals themselves — in the Poconos, which is about as far south as this northern rodent lives in the eastern United States. Look in hemlock-pine forests with big rock outcrops, ledges or boulder-filled slopes where their trails can be followed to dens or favorite feeding trees. The clues are abundant and easy to follow in winter.



Baby porcupines are referred as pups. The quills of newborns are soft but become hardened defense weapons within a few weeks.

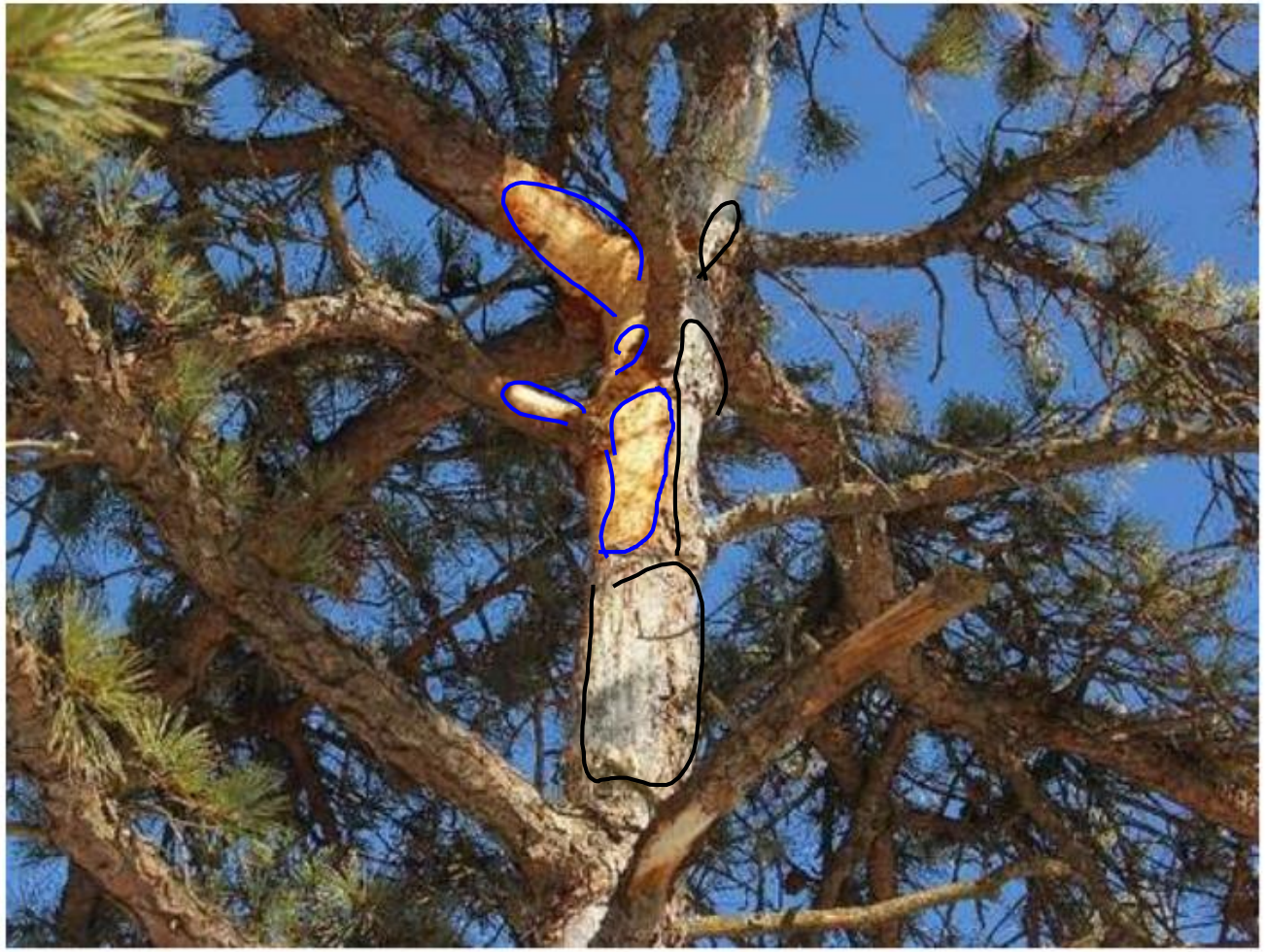


The track of a porcupine is distinctive: broad and pigeon-toed. Porkies often drag their feet and bodies through deep snow.



It's not that difficult to find a porcupine in the Poconos. Look for round bundles of quills up in trees and perhaps you will discover a porky fast asleep.

Porcupines are found in the northern forested sections of Pennsylvania, yet they have been expanding their range southward within the state.



Porcupines are vegetarian rodents: They consume plants, seeds, grasses and tree bark and limbs. In winter, freshly gnawed bark on conifers such as this pitch pine are indicators of a porcupine’s meal.