

Porcupine, Quill — Nuuniq

QIKERTAQ NUUNIITUQ. – THERE ARE NO PORCUPINE ON KODIAK ISLAND.



Photo: A North American porcupine (*Erethizon dorsatum*). Photo by Lisa Hupp, courtesy of the USF&WS National Digital Library.

The North American porcupine (*Erethizon dorsatum*) is a large rodent found in Alaska's forests and shrubby environments. These stout, slow-moving creatures have short legs, a muscular tail, and a thick layer of body fat. They can weigh up to about 18 pounds and are excellent climbers. However, porcupines are best known for their quills—stiff, hollow hairs barbed at the end. When touched these quills can detach easily and stick to whatever they encounter—a predator, a tree, a piece of clothing. The Alutiiq word for thorn – *cukiq* – also means porcupine quill.

Porcupines are widely present in mainland Alaska, but they have not colonized the Alaska Peninsula or many of Alaska's coastal islands. They have never been part of the Kodiak environment. This means that porcupines can only be harvested in about half of the Alutiiq world in Prince William Sound and on the Kenai Peninsula. The absence of porcupines on Kodiak and the Alaska Peninsula does not mean they were unknown or unused. Quills appear in the embroidery decorating clothing and skin bags collected at Katmai in 1843. And porcupine incisors were likely among the rodent teeth used as bits for carving tools.

On the mainland people pluck porcupines to harvest their quills. Porcupines make soft grumbly noises, interpreted as singing. Legend has it that if you sing to a porcupine it helps to loosen the quills. People report cooking porcupine liver in the fatty membrane found over its stomach. The grease melts and soaks into the liver and the thin membrane becomes crispy. Porcupine bladders were used as floats and as waterproof containers.