



# Beware the Spiny Pig

A compendium of porcupine points

BY MICHAEL ENGELHARD

Porcupines range throughout most forested areas of Alaska, although none live on Prince of Wales Island in Southeast or nearby islands to the west.

**T**HOUGH IT'S NOT YOUR TYPICAL GAME ANIMAL, EVEN children and the elderly hunted *ts'it*, clubbing it with a stick. Traditionally, the Gwich'in also killed the large rodent delicacy with snares or deadfall traps. Fall was the preferred time, or winter, when food was scarce and the animal fat and moving slowly. Tracks in the snow, spruce with freshly gnawed, neatly edged patches stripped of bark, or scat pellets at a trunk's base all betrayed porcupine. A hunter might chop down a tree with one hiding in a crotch. Before boiling the meat he'd singe off the quills—about 30,000—by placing the animal in or above a fire.

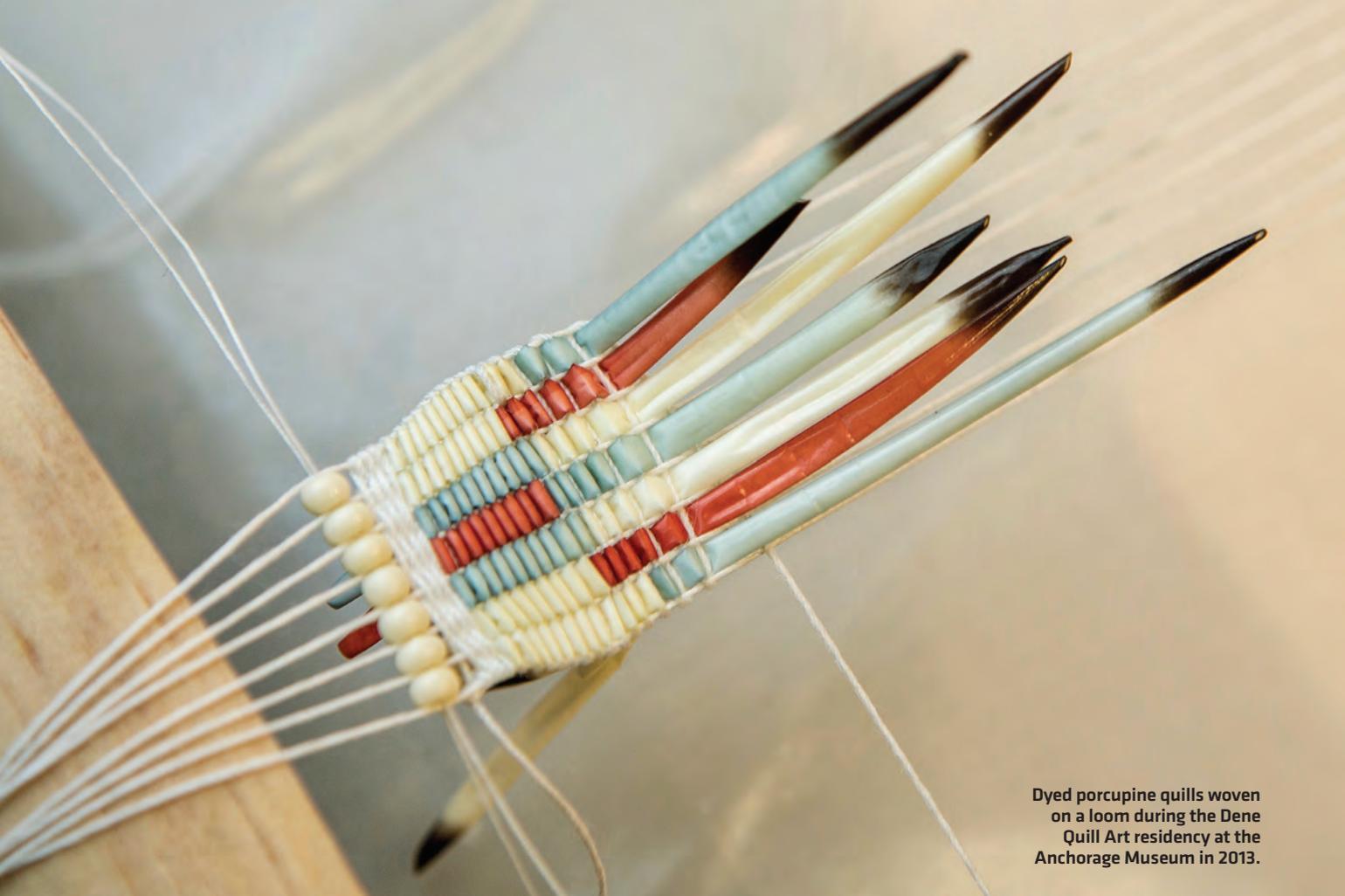
In an art form endemic to North America, porcupine quills embellished caribou-skin tunics and dresses, leggings, moccasin tops, and the backs of mittens, as did dentalium shells and later, beads. After snipping off the quills' tips, a seamstress flattened the stems with her teeth or a bone tool before sewing them onto hides punctured with an awl. The keratin spines dyed well steeped in cranberry juice, huckleberry juice, or alder bark solution.

The species' Latin name, *Erethizon dorsatum*, translates as "irritating back," and a group of porcupines is a "prickle." Known for their defensive stance, these tree dwellers can live up to 30 years if they manage to dodge predators. Padded with underfur



and coarse, long guard hairs, they curl into balls to weather snowy cold inside caves, cleft logs, or thickets. Common in forests, alders, and willows as far south as Texas while roaming as far north as the Arctic coast, they've imprinted Alaska's terrain. Hudson's Bay Company agents christened the Porcupine River, a Yukon tributary, inspired by Ch'oodeenjik, the Gwich'in's "Porcupine Quill River," and tree blazes edged with tooth marks

(THIS PAGE) TOP: TODD SALAT; BOTTOM: TOM WALKER  
(OPPOSITE PAGE) WAYDE CARROLL, COURTESY SMITHSONIAN ARCTIC STUDIES CENTER



Dyed porcupine quills woven on a loom during the Dene Quill Art residency at the Anchorage Museum in 2013.

are ubiquitous.

A barbed-wire snarl of the animal world, the beaver's cousin waddles leisurely because armor permits it. As a first measure to repel unwanted advances, the clawed, nocturnal climber, whose common name stems from the Middle French *porc d'épine*—"spiny pig"—flattens its foot-long quills, flashing bands of black and white, imitating skunks. The next level of intimidation involves teeth chattering and releasing a pungent odor from a gland at the base of its tail. When these means fail, the critter raises its quills by contracting the back's skin, faces away from the attacker, and shakes its appendage like a mace to spike the aggressor's eyes, nose, or muzzle. It literally has its guard up. Hissing, growling, and backing up fast are part of its repertoire. Modern wildcrafters who desire the quills for earrings or appliqué without wanting to harm the animal corner one and tap its back with a Styrofoam paddle, which will collect the bristling bounty. New quills begin to grow within a few days.

Dogs lack experience, as dozens of pincushion mugs on the Internet show; but wolverines know how to breach the touch-me-not defense. They circle a porcupine, biting its face, and then flip it over to tear into the soft belly.

The quills have a nasty way of lancing farther into tissue when a victim's muscles contract. Hundreds of microscopic one-way barbs at their tips let them pierce flesh easier than hypodermic needles of a comparable size. These barbs flare out under pressure, making it harder to extract any quills—bio-engineers replicate the design in plastic polymer for use in surgeries. Fatalities from quill "migration" deep into bodies have been described. In 1934, a man ate a porcupine meat sandwich and

died from internal stab wounds aggravated by an infection. However, contrary to folk belief, a porcupine cannot "shoot" or "throw" quills. The spines simply dislodge on impact, embedding in the contact surface.

It comes as no surprise that male porkers routinely fight each other by wielding quills and orange incisors as weapons. The prize is the chance to mate with a receptive female. A bout's winner, as a rule the heftier opponent, splashes the damsel with urine, often while both perch in a tree. A female not in heat shakes off the urine and skedaddles. Consummation, if it does happen, occurs on the ground. To spare her suitor the pain, she curls her tail over her back, underside up, covering most of her quills.

The lumbering hermits plague not only curious mutts. Craving sodium, they chew on ax handles or wooden parts of hand tools, or on boots rimed with road salt and left outside cabin doors. They chisel through plywood, as sodium plays a role in its production.

The famous wildlife biologist Olaus J. Murie, who spent years in Alaska in the 1920s, regarded porcupines as rather vocal. He once mistook two that were bleating for a moose calf; a companion ascribed another one's moaning to a bear cub. Woodsmen have also reported cries like a baby's, and screams. But those might have been vocalizations of some hapless porcupine casualty. 🐿️

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*Rooting for the underdog, Michael Engelhard has a soft spot for "Alaska's hedgehogs." He now lives in northern Arizona, where most spiny things are plants.*