



## *Our Mission -*

*"TO ENSURE THE PRESERVATION OF THE CHARACTER AND BIOLOGICAL DIVERSITY OF WAGNER NATURAL AREA FOR EDUCATIONAL, SCIENTIFIC AND RESEARCH PURPOSES."*

# Friends of the Fen

WAGNER NATURAL AREA SOCIETY NEWSLETTER



## Upcoming events:

June 17, 2018

### Orchid Walk

**Tour leader:** TBD

**Time:** 10:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m.

Meet at parking lot at 10:00 a.m.

**Please register** that you plan to attend through

email: [info@wagnerfen.ca](mailto:info@wagnerfen.ca)

July 10, 2018

### Bat Walk

**Tour leader:** Member of the Alberta Community Bat Program

**Time:** 9:30 p.m. Meet at parking lot at 9:30 p.m.

**Please register** that you plan to attend through

email: [info@wagnerfen.ca](mailto:info@wagnerfen.ca)

Visit our website:

[www.wagnerfen.ca](http://www.wagnerfen.ca)

for more information on upcoming events at Wagner Natural Area.

# EDUCATION:

## Wildlife of the Week #1: Porcupine

MEGAN EDGAR, WAGNER NATURAL AREA SOCIETY, MAY 9, 2018

**Common name:** North American porcupine, Common porcupine, Canadian porcupine

**Scientific name:** *Erethizon dorsatum*

**Family:** Erethizontidae

Porcupines are otherworldly animals, with spikes that grow from their backs, strong climbing skills, and who have a bad reputation to many dog owners. North American porcupines can be found in Wagner Natural Area and throughout Canada. Through my research I have learned that the porcupine is the second largest rodent in Alberta (Alberta Agriculture and Forestry 2005). Porcupines can measure up to 90 cm in length, weigh as much as 12 kg and can live up to 18 years in the wild. These long-living rodents are widely dispersed through the province, but typically near forest stands. Porcupines are a nocturnal species, primarily active throughout the night, and have poor eyesight, but their senses of hearing and smell are excellent. What I found surprising, and I am sure others would too, is that this species does not hibernate over the winter. Other identifying features of this animal are their thick tail and short powerful legs with long, curved claws. These claws make it easier for them to grasp and climb trees (Alberta Environment and Parks 2010). They tend to feed on green leaves of forbs, shrubs and trees in the summer. In the winter they feed on the inner bark (cambium), twigs and buds of trees.



**Figure 1:** Trunk damage caused by porcupine at Wagner Natural Area.  
**Photo credit:** Britney Blomquist

One of their unique features is their defence mechanism, which is what people typically tend to think of when they imagine the porcupine. Myself, and I'm sure others, have seen this defence mechanism in action when curious dogs approach a porcupine, only to have 30 quills stuck in their curious snouts. On a porcupine's body, it can have up to

## Support us!



The **Wagner Natural Area Society** welcomes new supporters, volunteers, and all people interested in natural history and the preservation of the ecological integrity of this delightful natural area.

### VOLUNTEERS / MEMBERS

People of all talents and interests are desired and welcomed to become more closely involved with the Natural Area and the Society.

Email us at:  
[info@wagnerfen.ca](mailto:info@wagnerfen.ca)

### DONATIONS

All donations to Wagner Natural Area Society are enormously helpful in maintaining the integrity of the Natural Area and its surroundings, providing education material, enhancements to visitor's experiences at Wagner, on-going research studies and surveys.

Please see page 4 for the donation/volunteer form.

30,000 fortified and barbed quills that are included in the composition of their coats (Alberta Agriculture and Forestry 2005). According to Alberta Environment and Parks (2010), and contrary to some beliefs, porcupines cannot throw their quills, rather they can embed their quills into a perceived threat with a speedy slap of their tails. Alas, knocking aside our preconceived ideas that we learned as children while watching cartoons where the quills of the porcupine fly out of their backs. Before the porcupine slaps their tail into a threat, they will communicate that they are feeling threatened by vocalizing, as well as displaying their quills and chattering their teeth together. In these situations it is important to back away slowly and respect the animal's presence. Interestingly, these quills are hollow which reduces their body weight and adds to the buoyancy of the animal, which is useful when the porcupine occasionally swims.

Different from other rodent species, there is usually only one porcupine that is born to each female between mid-May through to July (Alberta Environment and Parks 2010). The young are precocial, meaning they are born in an advanced state of development and are able to feed themselves almost immediately. This characteristic is unique to the porcupine, as it is the only North American rodent to give birth to precocial young. According to the Edmonton and Area Land Trust website (2016), the baby porcupines, adorably known as porcupettes, should be left alone if a person were to find them on the ground. Though one may want to do the opposite of what this website advises, as is the good nature of humans to help baby animals, this is where the mother porcupine will leave her young while she naps in the trees and will return at night to feed her young (so don't fret!).



**Figure 2:** North American porcupine in tree.  
**Photo credit:** Paul Bolstad.  
[www.bugwood.org](http://www.bugwood.org)

It takes only one jaunt around the Marl Pond Trail at the Wagner Natural Area to witness the moderate foraging that the North American porcupine presence has on the large white spruce trees (*Picea glauca*) near Post #18 and the forest ground cover area of the trail. If you look closely through the trees, you can see that one of them has been heavily foraged around the entire trunk, this is called girdling. Though the porcupine does have the capacity to girdle trees and ultimately cause mortality by feeding on the inner tree bark, buds, twigs and evergreen needles, it is important to keep in mind their significance (Edmonton and Area Land Trust 2016). Porcupines help keep forests healthy by eating mistletoe, a parasitic plant that grows

on many different tree species, as well as thinning out dense stands of saplings.

## References:

Alberta Agriculture and Forestry. (2005). *Control of Porcupine Damage*. Retrieved from [https://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/\\$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/agdex3470](https://www1.agric.gov.ab.ca/$department/deptdocs.nsf/all/agdex3470) [May 9, 2018].

Alberta Environment and Parks. (2010). *Common Porcupine (Erethizon dorsatum)*. Retrieved from <http://aep.alberta.ca/fish-wildlife/wild-species/mammals/rabbits-rodents/porcupine.aspx> [May 9, 2018].

Edmonton and Area Land Trust. (2016). *Porcupine*. Retrieved from <https://www.ealt.ca/species-spotlight-list/porcupine> [May 9, 2018].

## MEMBERSHIP --- WAGNER NATURAL AREA SOCIETY

### Support / Donate / Volunteer

For information about Wagner Natural Area and the Society, and about field trips and other activities organized from time to time for the benefit of all friends of Wagner, go to [www.wagnerfen.ca](http://www.wagnerfen.ca).

Wagner Natural Area Society is a Registered Charity. Donations to the Society will help maintain this very special area. Donations of \$20 or more will be receipted for Income Tax purposes.  
CRA B/N119287522 RR 0001

The Society's annual fee is \$10 for Supporters and \$15 for Voting Members. The Society's fiscal year is January 1 to December 31.

Annual fee (Supporter \$10/Voting \$15): \$ \_\_\_\_\_

Donation: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

TOTAL: \$ \_\_\_\_\_

May the Society CONTACT you by: EMAIL: Yes / No

PHONE: Yes / No

Email address: \_\_\_\_\_

Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

If you can VOLUNTEER to help the Society with maintenance of the Natural Area (circle): Yes

Name(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Mailing Address: \_\_\_\_\_

Mail this form with cheque/money order, payable to Wagner Natural Area Society, to:

Treasurer, Wagner Natural Area Society,  
30531-118 Ave., Acheson, AB T7X 6M5

## SITE MANAGEMENT: Clean-up day Thank You!

Thank you to all the volunteers who came out on Saturday, May 5, 2018, for our annual Spring clean-up day!

Just a reminder for all new and returning visitors: please remember to take your garbage with you when you leave Wagner Natural Area, including dog waste and especially cigarette butts. Unfortunately, we found many cigarette butts on the ground and along the trail--we strongly discourage this as it contributes to environmental and health hazards in our natural area.



## A letter from the WNAS President: Dave Ealey

Thanks to some funding support from Parkland County and the Canadian Parks and Recreation Association, and an intern from MacEwan University, we've been very busy getting the word out about the values of Wagner Natural Area this year.

If you've been visiting Wagner this spring, you may have met our summer student, Megan, or our communications intern, Britney. Several classrooms in elementary schools in Parkland County are getting presentations to show the value of Wagner Natural Area as an environmental education resource. And of course, we're doing on-site tours for groups and the general public.

Hope to see you on the Marl Pond Trail!