

Bird Meets (or eats) Porcupine

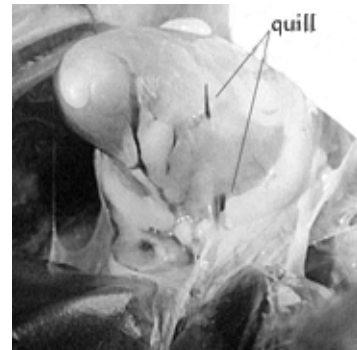
In or on, we have found quills in sixteen cases

#4368 Great Horned Owl, female, March

This thin owl had eaten her porcupine, and had quills hooked in her skin from the top of her head to the soles of her feet (all ventrally) including some in her tongue, which prevented her from eating. We helped by gently tucking small mice over her swallow reflex until she could manage by herself.



4368 quills in face--note those in her whiskers



4368 quill through heart

Over the next two weeks we gave her a course of three combined antibiotics to overcome the pus that popped up from each quill as we continued to remove more nearly every day. She had been recovering nicely from her infected feet (many quills had broken off short inside her soles) and had begun to eat on her own with appetite, gained 300g, and became quite lively. On Day 14, she suddenly fell over dead.

Though we had plucked hundreds of quills from her face, breast, legs and feet, on post-mortem there were many more in her stomach that had continued to migrate out through the thin tissue; though owl stomachs do have a hard muscle area, they are mostly stretchy bags rather than the thick-walled, tough muscular gizzards found in seed-eaters. Two quills had completely penetrated her liver, and one had stitched itself through the left ventricle of her heart, with fatal results. I wonder, did she eat the porcupine and then become starved, or vice-versa?



5179's stomach before opening it

5179 Great Horned Owl, female, February

In this case the accident predated the meal. She was found grounded following an accident that caused left-sided wing paralysis, left torn iris damage and a corneal ulceration; the paralyzed wing was frozen through.

Under anaesthetic we removed hundreds of fresh quills from the top of her head to the soles of her feet, with some even on the back of her neck, in both wings, at the anal area, one through an eyelid and one up her nose! There were great clumps in the pectorals, making them crunchy to the touch. The inside of her mouth was studded

with small pale ones from the porcupine's underbelly. Some time after this first attempt to remove most of the quills she was up, though groggy, and even ate a mouse.

The next morning she was standing on her feet, head bowed, stiff in rigour. She had died so suddenly that her corpse had not even fallen over!

Who could resist a post-mortem to find out how that came about?

Poor creature. There were hundreds of quills that were inside the skin and deep in muscle out of sight. Quills poked through the liver, one had stabbed a kidney, some were around one of the lungs, one punctured the intestine. The stomach was fascinating: as prickly as a wild cucumber, there were dozens of long dark quills sticking out 20mm or so. When opened, there was the mouse of the afternoon before, partly digested, resting on top of a sweetish-smelling mass of what looked like greenish vegetation with white stalks—belly quills. Cause of sudden death was pericardial effusion: stabbed by quills, the outer sac enclosing the heart (the pericardium) was now a large floppy bag of blood and clots hiding a very small heart [pericardial effusion]. Some of the quills were as long as 48mm (2"). Ironically, her heart was pierced by this little arrow on Valentine's Day!

Female Great Horned Owls do advance on porcupines, dead or alive, and some like these two, do eat their prey. We have had ten females with quills; two were in June, the rest between January and March. Four of these owls recovered and were released.

I judged the releases to be females by beak, talon and wing-chord size, as well as their weight when correlated with the state of their pectoral plumpness. I have never seen a male Great Horned with even a single quill, just as they very seldom have an encounter with a living skunk. They seem more prudent than their larger mates.

Turkey Vulture, April

Healthy female dying of haemorrhage after being struck by a vehicle while cleaning up a porcupine corpse. Besides two quills in her feet, there were two more right through her stomach wall.

The small number of quills showed that the vulture's meal did not argue, while the owls (above) encountered active resistance.

On, In, and Under the Corpse:

Sometimes porcupine quills found in a bird have another meaning. I have told this 1997 story before, but it bears repeating.

Great Gray Owl, Male, February

A very healthy northern owl was struck by a vehicle and flung dead on a snowbank at the side of a road. Blood had run down from the haemorrhaging brain through nostrils and had flowed over beak, a common occurrence with such violent collisions. I was surprised to find some porcupine quills lightly stuck in the skin just behind each hallux (the back talon) as well as a few on the back of the tarsus (lower leg) of one foot; they were undamaged and white, suggesting a light pass, as none were found in feet or anywhere else in body. On post-mortem I discovered he was indeed well-fed that day: the stomach was a hugely stretched bag with a very large mole at the bottom, a mouse in the middle, and an undigested shrew on the top!



*Turkey Vulture stomach opened –
2 quills still in situ*

This bit of reportage was seized upon and reprinted by Peter Whelan, birding columnist of the Toronto Globe & Mail who called me, as he occasionally was wont to do late at night when searching for unusual bird tidbits. Naturalist Jim Duncan responded: the Great Gray had not been *attacking* the porcupine, he said, but targeting a shrew scavenging the road-kill; the owl was swooping with legs outstretched to snatch the shrew without stopping in flight. He was exactly right, as proven by the stomach contents. Sadly, Peter has since died; I rather miss our long late-night chats.

Shrews

There are several species of shrews, some being the smallest mammals in the world (excepting the Bumblebee Bat of Thailand, about which I know nothing) weighing as little as 2 grams, like a hummingbird; and they also have the highest of mammal metabolisms, needing to eat nearly constantly to survive. They hunt insects and their ilk such as grasshoppers, fly pupae, slugs, snails, earthworms, beetles and centipedes; also mice, and they do not hesitate to scavenge on such corpses as road-kills. This probably explains the following case as well.

#6937 Screech Owl, December

Hit the side of a car a few hours earlier. Though this plump little owl had no severe injuries, he was feeling lousy, so I just left him alone; he recovered quickly and was released six days later by the driver of the car. One unusual find: attached to his lower back was a single porcupine quill lying flat with the plumage and found by my touch on a hard “feather”. The quill was half white and came out easily. He too may have been chasing a shrew that had dived under a porcupine road-kill.

American Robin, Adult female, June

Starving, very ill, died soon. Porcupine quill through neck, mouth and into palate. Perhaps she too had been searching out insects near a porcupine corpse.



quill through a robin's neck

Why not keep an old glove or shovel in your vehicle and stop to push a corpse off the road? It only takes a minute and will save lives. I have always found oncoming drivers understanding

Kit Chubb

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