

A Greener View: Armadillos are a-headin' north, yard by yard

by Jeff_Rugg

I love it when I write something that people respond to, even if it is an error or an omission on my part. I sure could feel the love this week.

Recently, I responded to a question about small holes being dug in a lawn. The writer happened to mention the region they live in, which is always useful for me in order to give an appropriate answer. Unfortunately, this time, that caused me to limit my thinking to animals in the upper Midwest. Several Southern gardeners correctly reminded me that armadillos also cause the same kind of damage to lawns and gardens.

Sometimes I don't mention the original area where the question came from, since I want to give an answer for all regions if possible. I don't want people to skip reading the answer if they don't think it will apply to their region, which brings us back to armadillos. If they haven't come yet, just wait, they are on the way.

These South American relatives of the anteater are heading north and may eventually range from Cape Cod in the Northeast through the Ohio River valley into the Great Plain states. They can also live along the Pacific Coast and in a few interior regions. The biggest hindrance to their expansion is the cold.

They have very little body fat for insulation. They also have a low metabolic rate, body temperature and a poor immune system, which all help in making them useful in medical research. Because of the low fat level - they can't keep warm and they don't have stored fat to live on - they must eat daily. Their main diet of small insects, grubs and ants isn't always available if the weather is near freezing for more than a few days at a time, and yet armadillos have already expanded their range north into southern Missouri and Kansas.

Armadillos conserve heat the same way birds do, by having veins and arteries in the legs close together, so that heat is exchanged and conserved in the body. With no way to warm the extremities, armadillos are susceptible to frostbite.

There are 20 species in South and Central America, with several nearing extinction. The nine-banded armadillo is the only one north of Mexico.

All armadillos are built to dig. They have stout legs and long claws that can tear up ant hills and rotting logs. They have sticky tongues to gather insects. They all have plates on their backs made of bone. This prevents all but one species from rolling up into a ball. The nine-banded armadillo can curl, but not roll into a ball. To escape people and predators, it will usually run away and then dig like crazy to make a shallow hole to defend itself.

They can cause a lot of damage if they attempt to get grubs or other insects out of a lawn. They often make conical holes by sticking their snout into the ground and then walking in a circle. They then regularly check these holes to see if insects have fallen in. They also eat garden and landscape plants and can scavenge on dead animals if the opportunity arises, probably mainly for the insect larvae that inhabit the carcass.

The biggest problem is burrowing. They live in burrows almost a foot in diameter that range from 1 to 2 foot long to more than 20 feet long. They often have numerous small temporary burrows in their territory, but they usually like larger, more permanent homes that have several entrances.

They like areas with lots of underbrush, so clearing out an area can help keep them away, but the best solution is going to be fencing. The fence has to be buried at least a foot underground, since they will dig under a regular fence.

Even though they are not social animals that travel in groups, you will often see several at once. That's because four babies always develop from a single egg, making every armadillo birth a birth of four naturally cloned mammals. When you get four or five armadillos (including mom) digging in the yard, they can cause a lot of damage.

Some of the readers told me that their local animal control people trapped them. Others said they were successful in getting rid of them by placing coyote urine, purchased at the local garden center, in their gardens.

Check with your local government agencies to see whether armadillos are protected. If not, you could hunt and eat them. They are edible and were once called Hoover Hogs in post-Great Depression days. If you are a Texan, you can add armadillo meat to chili, even if it is the state mammal.

One of the natural defense mechanisms armadillos use has led to it being killed by cars. Armadillos are mammals and therefore have hair, though not much hair, but just enough to aid in its defense. If it is surprised by something touching its back hairs, it springs up into the air. It can jump several feet high! If it is crossing a road and the air of a passing car causes the hair to react, the armadillo can jump straight up into the bottom of the car that would have otherwise have passed safely overhead.

The opossum has expanded north, and it looks as if the armadillo may be headed for Canada. Especially if the winter weather becomes more mild.

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