

ARMADILLOS

by Rex Martensen, photos by Jim Rathert

in Missouri

These scaly, armored mammals are moving northward.



“WHAT WAS THAT?” you might exclaim, when you see a ’possum-sized, scaly-looking creature shoot across a Missouri highway.

“What happened here?” you might wonder when you wake one morning and find your lawn transformed into a series of holes and dirt piles.

Although many of our wild creatures have a long history in Missouri, armadillos have only recently arrived. They’re here because they find parts of our state suitable for living, and they’re not likely to leave. If we’re going to host these strange-looking animals, we’d better learn as much about them as we can.

Identification

Nine-banded armadillos are unusual and interesting critters. The animals weigh from 2 to 20 pounds, have short legs, big ears and a ringed tail almost as long as their body.

They get their name from a hard protective covering that contains usually nine moveable bands between the shoulder and hip shields.

A large immovable shield protects their head, and a series of 12 overlapping rings shield the tail. Small scales cover their legs, and only their ears and underbelly have exposed soft skin.

Armadillos have four stout claws on their front feet and five on the hind feet. Hairs protrude from their scaly armor and sparsely cover their belly.



Armadillos search for food by rooting in the ground. They are great diggers and sometimes damage lawns and gardens.

Range

The armadillo’s general lack of hair combined with its low body-fat content make it ill-equipped to handle extended periods of severely cold weather, which may limit the northward range of the species.

Armadillos can be found from Texas, along the southern tier states to Florida, South Carolina, Tennessee, Kentucky, and northward into Arkansas, Oklahoma and southern Kansas. Confirmed sightings have come from as far north as southern Illinois and Indiana.

Armadillos first appeared in the south and southwest portions of Missouri in the mid-1970s. Since then, they have extended northward into practically every county south of the Missouri River, and there have been a few sightings north of the river.

Habits and Reproduction

In the summer, armadillos are most active from twilight through the early morning hours. In winter they are only active during the day when temperatures rise.

They may have several burrows within their territory for protection and raising young. These burrows are usually 7 or 8 inches in diameter and up to 15 feet long. They can be found in rock piles, brush piles, around stumps or under sidewalks and patios.

Breeding generally occurs in the summer, but pregnancy is delayed for about five months, followed by a 150-day gestation period. Genetically identical quadruplets are born in the spring and will start to emerge from the den in early summer. By fall the quadruplets have usually dispersed.

Food

Armadillos eat earthworms, spiders, scorpions and other invertebrates, but 90 percent of their diet is made up of insects and their larvae. One armadillo can eat about 200 pounds of insects per year. Their diet may be another limiting factor in the northward expansion of their range. Armadillos get most of their food underground. When the ground is frozen or becomes covered in snow and ice, their food sources are limited.

Digging Damage

Generally speaking, armadillos are harmless, but their digging and rooting often causes problems. Most folks are somewhat baffled after waking up and finding their yards covered with random pock marks.

Skunks can cause similar unsightly damage, but armadillo digs are usually larger and more

Armadillo Facts

- Armadillo is Spanish for “little armored one.”
- During the Great Depression, armadillos were known as “Hoover hogs” because they were eaten instead of the “chicken in every pot” that President Herbert Hoover had promised.
- Armadillos can contract and carry leprosy (Hansen’s disease). However, the only known way they can transfer this disease is when humans eat undercooked armadillo meat.
- Armadillos often end up as road kill because they have a habit of jumping up in the air when startled. This can be deadly when they are underneath a moving vehicle.



frequent, measuring 1 to 3 inches deep and 4 to 5 inches across. The holes may have dirt thrown out or v-shaped pieces of sod may be peeled back. By looking closely in the hole you might even see the cavity that once contained a grub or insect.

Damage Protection

Removing habitat that could attract armadillos might prevent them from turning up on your property. Keep lawns and adjacent areas free of brush, wood piles and other places of refuge. Because moist soil and green grass attract armadillos, reducing watering and fertilization might keep them from digging up your yard.

Armadillos are easily discouraged by barriers. In smaller areas, such as flower beds or gardens, a fence might solve the problem. Because armadillos can dig and climb, fences should be constructed of sturdy material at least 24 inches high with 8 to 12 inches buried underground.

The fence should be built outward at an angle, or the top of the fence should come out at a right angle to prevent armadillos from going over. A single-strand electric fence set 3 to 4 inches off the ground might also be effective.

Although there are some repellents that claim to keep armadillos away, their effectiveness has not been substantiated. Some fumigants, such as gas cartridges, may drive animals out when used in den locations. None, however, are currently registered for use in controlling armadillos.

Trapping

Capturing armadillos is challenging because of their nocturnal behavior and general lack of interest in baited

foot-hold traps. Cage-type traps, however, can be effective when set as follows.

Place traps that are at least 10-by-12-by-32 inches along pathways leading to burrows or along fences or other barriers. In each trap, suspend a nylon sack filled with overripe fruits, earthworms or mealworms. Because armadillos are not always attracted to bait, enhance the trap’s effectiveness by using 1-by-4 or 1-by-6 inch boards at least 6 feet long as wings to help funnel the animals into the opening.

Shooting

Rule 3 CSR 10-4.130 of the *Wildlife Code of Missouri* allows landowners to use lethal methods to control wildlife causing property damage. Shooting, where allowed by local statutes, is effective in controlling nuisance armadillos.

The best time to shoot is when armadillos are most active, either during twilight hours or at night by using a spotlight or yard lights. A shotgun with No. 4 to BB shot or a .22 or other small caliber rifle will penetrate the armadillo’s armor. Use good judgement and always be sure you have a safe shot.

Shooting should be a method of last resort, however. As armadillo numbers increase, we’re bound to have a few conflicts. It’s usually the case when wildlife and people share space that good fences make good neighbors. When it comes to armadillos, an ounce of prevention is definitely worth a pound of cure. ▲

For more information on controlling armadillos on your property, contact the regional office near you.

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