

NATIONAL WILDLIFE WEEK

March 19-25, 2012



NINE-BANDED ARMADILLO

Wildlife with Innovative Defenses

Scientific Name: *Dasypus novemcinctus*

Description: The term “armadillo” means “little armored one,” and refers to the presence of bony armor-like plates covering their body. Despite their name, nine-banded armadillos can have 7 to 11 bands on their armor. The armor helps to protect them from predators such as pumas, black bears, and alligators. They are nocturnal, and spend their waking time burrowing or feeding on insects.

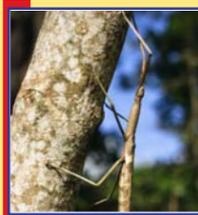
U.S. Habitat and Range: Nine-banded armadillos are found in the southeastern United States, but their range has been expanding northward for over 100 years, as far north as Illinois and Nebraska! They prefer warm, wet climates and live in forested or grassland habitats.

Fun Fact: Nine-banded armadillos almost always give birth to four identical quadruplets.

Conservation Status: Increasing throughout most of their range due to a lack of natural predators. Roadways have offered them easier means of travel to new habitats.

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STICK INSECTS

Wildlife with Innovative Defenses

Scientific Name: Order Phasmida

Description: Stick insects, or walking sticks, are a group of highly camouflaged insects. They escape predation by blending into plant material. As their name implies, they look just like sticks with legs, and will even sway back and forth to more closely resemble a twig moving in the wind. When camouflage isn't enough, some species have evolved the ability to release foul-smelling chemicals to deter predators, and others can secrete a liquid that will temporarily blind their foe.

U.S. Habitat and Range: Stick insects live in woodlands and tropical forests and can be found throughout most of the continental United States.

Fun Fact: Stick insects are a favorite food of many animals, but perhaps their most effective predators are bats. Most bats hunt by echolocation rather than sight, so they aren't fooled by the insect's stick-like appearance.

Conservation Status: Stable, but threatened by habitat destruction, pesticide use, and collection for the pet trade.

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CACTI

Wildlife with Innovative Defenses

Scientific Name: Family Cactaceae

Description: The family Cactaceae comprises many species of flowering plants with succulent (water-storing) stems. They have structures called “areoles” that set them apart from all other plants. Areoles give rise to flowers, new branches, and spines. There are different types of spines—some are soft and feathery to protect the plant from intense sunlight, while others are tough and sharp for protection. Cacti can be one of the few sources of water in dry regions, so spines prevent animals from using them as drinking fountains. Some cacti are so good at storing water that they can live in drought conditions for several years!

U.S. Habitat and Range: Cacti are thought of as strictly desert plants, but many species, such as the prickly pear cactus, can be found throughout the continental U.S. and into Canada.

Fun Fact: Cacti are able to bloom every year, but they produce an exceptional abundance of flowers in response to heavy rains.

Conservation Status: Stable

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INNOVATIVE DEFENSES



SEA CUCUMBERS

Wildlife with Innovative Defenses

Scientific Name: Class Holothuroidea

Description: Sea cucumbers are part of a larger animal group called Echinodermata, which also includes starfish and sea urchins. Sea cucumbers can range in length from 1 centimeter to 5 meters. Their body shape is similar to a cucumber, but they have small tentacle-like tube feet that are used for locomotion and feeding. One way that sea cucumbers can confuse or harm predators is by propelling their own toxic internal organs from their anus in the direction of attack. The organs will grow back, and it may save them from being eaten!

U.S. Habitat and Range: Sea cucumbers are found in virtually all marine environments throughout the world. Some live on the seafloor and others float along in the open ocean.

Fun Fact: When disturbed, sea cucumbers can expose skeletal, hook-like structures that make them harder for predators to eat.

Conservation Status: Stable

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BURROWING OWL

Wildlife with Innovative Defenses

Scientific Name: *Athene cucularia*

Description: The burrowing owl is a ground-dwelling owl that is active during the day. Identifying characteristics include long legs, a brown body with speckles of white, and no ear tufts. Burrowing owls in Florida may dig their own nests, but most populations utilize abandoned burrows of prairie dogs, armadillos, skunks, or pocket gophers. The owlets are able to scare away predators by hiding in the burrow and mimicking the sounds of a rattlesnake.

U.S. Habitat and Range: Summer breeding populations can be found from the Midwest to the eastern parts of the Pacific states and into Canada. There are populations in Florida year round. Burrowing owls nest in open, treeless spaces.

Fun Fact: Burrowing owls collect mammal waste that they put around their nests to attract dung beetles, one of their favorite foods.

Conservation Status: Populations are declining in some areas due to pesticide use, habitat degradation, and automobile collisions.

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TOADS

Wildlife with Innovative Defenses

Scientific Name: Order Anura

Description: Toads are amphibians found in the same order as frogs. They differ from most frogs in that they have dry skin, warts, crests behind the eyes, and parotoid glands that produce a poisonous secretion that helps to defend the toad from predators. This substance, called “bufotoxin,” can cause death in small animals and allergic reactions in humans.

U.S. Habitat and Range: Many different species of toads live throughout the United States. Adults generally prefer moist, open habitats like grasslands and fields. The American toad is a common garden species that eats pest insects and can be seen in backyards in the northeast.

Fun Fact: Touching a toad will not give you warts! However, the bufotoxin found on their skin can cause irritation, so you should avoid touching toads.

Conservation Status: Over a half dozen U.S. toad species are Federally listed as Endangered.

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EXTRA-ORDINARY WILDLIFE



TARANTULAS

Wildlife with Innovative Defenses

Scientific Name: Family Theraphosidae

Description: Tarantulas are large, long-lived burrowing spiders that have become popular to keep as pets. While they pose few threats to humans, they are fierce predators of insects, and some South American species will even hunt birds and small mammals. When threatened, a tarantula will expose its fangs and put its weight on its hind legs. If that does not deter a predator, the spider may use its legs to shoot “urticating” hairs toward their attacker. These hairs cause minor irritation in humans, but can kill small mammals. Most people will only come across tarantulas when males wander about looking for a female to mate with.

U.S. Habitat and Range: Tarantulas are found in the southwestern U.S.

Fun Fact: Tarantulas spin webs for mating purposes rather than to capture prey.

Conservation Status: Certain species may be affected by habitat destruction or the pet trade.

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FLYING FISH

Wildlife with Innovative Defenses

Scientific Name: Family Exocoetidae

Description: Flying fish are ray-finned fish with highly modified pectoral fins. Despite their name, flying fish aren't capable of powered flight.

Instead, they propel themselves out of the water at speeds in excess of 35 miles per hour. Once in the air, their rigid “wings” allow them to glide for up to 200 meters. It is thought that flying fish evolved this ability to escape from their many predators.

U.S. Habitat and Range: Flying fish are tropical and temperate marine species that can be seen off of both U.S. coasts.

Fun Fact: Some flying fish also have wing-like pelvic fins that help them to glide. These species are called four-winged flying fish.

Conservation Status: Stable. Flying fish are commercially fished in some places. They are relatively easy to catch because of their tendency to leap into small, well-lit boats.

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BOMBARDIER BEETLES

Wildlife with Innovative Defenses

Scientific Name: *Brachinus* spp.

Description: There are over 40 species of bombardier beetles found in the United States. They have blue elytra (wing coverings) and reddish heads and limbs. They are considered remarkable because of their ability to shoot a boiling, corrosive substance at predators. An important feature of these beetles is the presence of two chambers within their abdomen that keep the critical reactants apart until they are ready to be discharged. When the beetle feels threatened, the contents of these two chambers are combined and released through the abdominal tip.

U.S. Habitat and Range: Present throughout North America. Bombardier beetles can be found in many different habitat types where there is ground cover for them to hide under.

Fun Fact: The abdominal tip through which their defensive chemical is sprayed can be rotated 270 degrees so that they can more easily fire at predators.

Conservation Status: Stable

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