



WILDLIFE NOTES

Armadillo

From information provided by: James N. Stuart
Artwork: Kathi Geoffrion Parker

What animal always produces a litter of four genetically identical young? What animal looks like it's armored for war in its hairless, bony-plated shell?

It's the armadillo (a Spanish name referring to the armor-like covering). The animal bears more of a resemblance to some prehistoric ancestor of modern fur-bearing mammals than to any present-day animal.

Few people in New Mexico would mistake the armadillo for any other animal, though many people in New Mexico probably have never seen one of these unusual creatures in the wild.

In fact, the 20 or so living species of armadillo are most closely related to sloths and anteaters and are the survivors of a once-diverse lineage of mammals with origins in the New World tropics. Only one species, the nine-banded armadillo (*Dasypus novemcinctus*), reaches North America, where it is found throughout much of the southern United States.

The armadillo is perhaps most-often sighted waddling alongside a rural highway

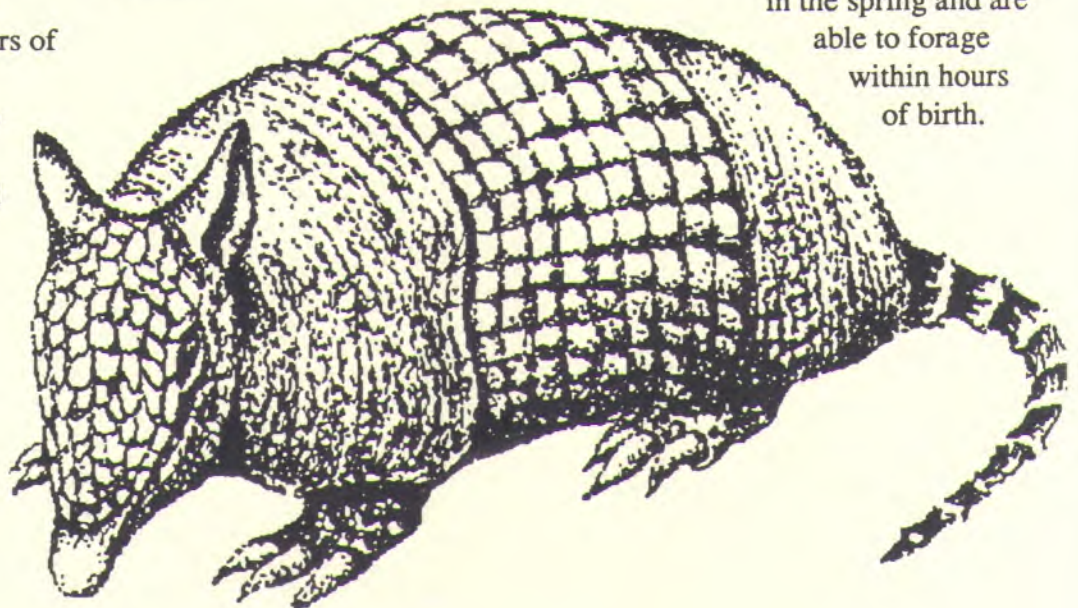
(or lying in the highway, victim of a passing automobile). On occasion, you might find one lying on its back in the road, feet kicking, unable to right itself because of its firm, round shell. A timid creature, the armadillo will quickly move away if you turn it over and remove it from the road.

Adults of the nine-banded armadillo usually measure about .9 of a meter (three feet) in total length and weigh about 4.5 to 7.65 kilograms (10 to 17 pounds). By comparison, one South American form may be more than 1.2 meters (four feet) long and weigh at least 145 kilograms (100 pounds).

Armadillos are powerful diggers and prefer areas of loose soil, where they excavate numerous burrows for shelter. Some of their favorite food items are obtained while digging and include insects, worms, centipedes, and other invertebrates. Snakes, lizards, carrion, and vegetable matter are also part of their diet.

Armadillos actively root for food on the surface as well, and are often oblivious to the presence of humans when hunting a meal. In the South they are often seen foraging along roadsides at night, and many are killed each year on highways.

Young armadillos are born in the spring and are able to forage within hours of birth.



Juvenile armadillos remain around the den with the mother until autumn, then disperse.

The nine-banded armadillo may be expanding its range in the United States. Because they do not hibernate and are sensitive to cold, armadillos are generally restricted to locales with mild winters. In years when winter temperatures are above normal, they may extend their range northward into new territory, only to be driven south again by the next hard freeze.

Such is the case in New Mexico, where the armadillo is apparently a fair-weather resident. No populations are known at

present in the state. Armadillos apparently did occur in the Jalisco area early in this century, but there is no evidence that they currently live in that area of southeastern New Mexico.

Two dead armadillos were observed on a highway near Santa Rosa in the 1960s, but none has been seen there since. Remains have also been found recently at Carrizozo in the southeast and in Union County in the extreme northeastern part of the state, but both cases appear to involve animals transported by man.

Sightings from the Texas Panhandle suggest that the armadillo has been moving west

in that state in recent years. A few pioneering individuals, therefore, might be expected to venture into eastern New Mexico.

If you find an armadillo in New Mexico, you are encouraged to photograph it (or collect it if it is dead) and note where and when you found it. Such information may provide important clues to the status of this unusual animal in our state.

James N. Stuart is a biologist in Albuquerque. Readers with information on armadillos in New Mexico may write him at the Museum of Southwestern Biology, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque, NM 87131.

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