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Armadillos in Daviess County

Those who read my column regularly know it is typically an agricultural subject. This week I'll lean on the natural resources in my job title to discuss armadillos. Yes, the nocturnal animal has been sighted in Daviess County. They are not inhabiting Daviess or surrounding counties at levels like I'm told of in southern Christian County, but the numbers will only increase. A friend in southern Christian told me last winter that armadillos are not eating their soybeans but do leave large piles of soil in their fields that they are pushing into with their combine headers. The Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife released a publication on armadillos in June of this year as the expansion is becoming more known. The following information was gleaned from that publication available at <https://fw.ky.gov/Wildlife/Pages/Wildlife-Diversity.aspx>.

The nine-banded armadillo is a solitary, nocturnal animal. Where other mammals have fur, the armadillo is uniquely known for its armor. They have multiple flat bones encased in material similar to a cattle horn. Though we have the nine-banded armadillo in Kentucky, the species has anywhere from seven to eleven bands between the larger plates shielding the upper and lower parts of its body. Armadillos are adaptable and can be found in many habitat types including tropical rainforest, open prairie, scrublands, and forests. They can survive in rainy

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environments as well as semi-arid environments. However, they have a low metabolic rate and struggle to maintain fat stores, so their range is limited by cold weather. Armadillos are prolific diggers and have long claws to help dig burrows and scrounge for bugs. They have very poor eyesight and rely heavily on their sensitive nose to sniff out insects underground. They primarily eat insects, beetles, worms, and other grubs; however, they do occasionally eat eggs. Because of this, armadillos may be encountered near nests of turtles, turkeys, other egg-laying wildlife, or even in chicken coops. Each spring, after a four-month gestation, a female armadillo gives birth to four identical quadruplets, all male or all female.

Unlike its three-banded cousin, the nine-banded armadillo cannot roll into a ball for protection and instead runs or quickly digs into the ground for defense. Another defense method armadillos employ is the vertical leap. They are capable of jumping up to four feet high when startled, a tactic that is thought to scare off predators and is one of the reasons armadillos so often end up the victim of roadkill. When a car on the highway tries to straddle an armadillo in an attempt to save its life, the spooked armadillo may jump straight up into the car as it passes over top of them. Armadillos are not aggressive toward people or other wildlife but may scratch or bite if handled. Nine-banded armadillos can carry leprosy, which is transmissible to people, so contact with armadillos should be kept to a minimum, and they should not be eaten.

Reports of nine-banded armadillos in Kentucky started in the mid-1980s with only occasional reports in the '90s but by the 2000s they had become fairly common in counties around Land Between the Lakes (LBL); expanding to the north and east from Mississippi, Alabama, and Tennessee. In the early 1990s, a deck hand working a barge line that traveled the Mississippi noted several occasions of armadillos walking on barge loads of sand, gravel, bark

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mulch, and other materials coming up from the states to the south. This may imply that armadillos were accidentally loaded into the barges with these materials and could be how armadillos were introduced to Kentucky initially. In recent years, they have even moved as far as southern Illinois and southwest Indiana. It is expected that the range of the nine-banded armadillo will continue to expand. Over the past 35-40 years, armadillos have quickly expanded their range from the deeper south into large portions of southern and western Kentucky. The terrain and cold weather of eastern Kentucky may have functioned as an ecological barrier to their migration in the past, but this may change in the coming years. Thus, it is possible that soon we may see armadillos in every county in Kentucky.

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