Nine-banded Armadillo

It has changed little since the Paleocene epoch, sixty-five million years ago when most orders of mammals evolved.

Dasypus novemcinctus isn't cute or cuddly, it doesn't have silky, shining fur, big sorrowful looking eyes, or attract any attention by its playful behavior. It's an oddity.

DESCRIPTION:

Armadillos are members of the family *Edentata,* which includes anteaters. The nine-banded armadillo, commonly seen in Florida, is about the size of a small dog or cat, weighs from eight to eleven pounds and is about fifteen to seventeen inches long. There are bony plates on its shoulders and rump with nine bands in between. Hence, the name. The tail is long and is composed of twelve rings.

These bony plates don't protect directly against predators which can bite through it, but they do protect the animal from thorns and other sharp plant material, which enables it to move quickly through thickets and undergrowth to escape predators.

Its head is small and tapered; it has a long tongue and long hairless ears. A few white hairs, however, can be found on its belly. It has very poor eyesight but has well-developed senses of hearing and smell.

BEHAVIOR:

The armadillo is principally nocturnal, solitary, and a prolific burrower that can begin digging and be out of sight in seconds (note the large front digging claws in the photo at the right). It is more active in the cool evenings of summer months, but during the winter it may be seen during the warmest part of the day.

It has the unusual habit of jumping straight up when startled, which puts it at about bumper height when suprised while trying to cross a road at night.

HABITAT:

Originally native to South America, the armadillo is the state mammal of Texas and was introduced into Florida in the early 1900's.

It is very successful in riparian habitats and has been has been spreading northward via rivers. The reasons for this migration may be due to climatic changes, overgrazing, loss of habitat, and man's removal of predators such as bobcats, coyotes, black bears, panthers, and foxes. It is now found as far north as Tennessee and Kansas.

The distribution of the armadillo is determined by the texture of the soil it burrows in. If the soil is too hard, especially in the dry season, the armadillo is unable to survive. It prefers a sandy soil with dense cover, depending on insects and other animal life it finds in the ground. In northern climes, it frequents stream and river banks, but too much water is limiting, so it avoids marshy areas.

A young armadillo forages for food under roots and fallen sticks and leaves between the Bunting House and the entrance trail in early July.

DIET:

Almost 93 per cent of its food consists of animal materials such as grubs, insects and other invertebrates. Less than seven per cent is vegetable matter which includes berries and fungi. It will dig up lawns while hunting grubs, but in the long run, the removal of grubs may be beneficial to the lawn.

BREEDING:

Individuals dig many dens although a breeding pair may share just one. Dens are usually straight with few turns, three to sixteen feet long, from a few inches to over three feet deep, and seven to eight inches in diameter.

Food burrows are generally shallower while those used for breeding may have a large nest chamber 18 inches or more in diameter. Nesting materials consist of dried leaves, grasses and other plant materials.

Armadillos pair up for one breeding season. This occurs at the end of July or August, but the embryo floats free in the uterus and remains dormant until November when implantation occurs.

Four young of the same sex are born in the burrow in March or April. They develop from a single egg and share a placenta (identical quadruplets). This is the only mammal that produces multiple young from a single egg on a regular basis.

The young are born with fully formed, open eyes and can walk within a few hours. They nurse for about two months, but may stay with the mother for several more. The young are ready to breed the following summer.