Awesome Armadillos

**Overview**

Armadillos are New World placental mammals with a leathery armour shell. The Chlamyphoridae and Dasypodidae are the only surviving families in the order, which is part of the superorder Xenarthra, along with the anteaters and sloths. The word armadillo means "little armoured one" in Spanish.

About nine extant genera and 21 extant species of armadillo have been described, some of which are distinguished by the number of bands on their armour. Their average length is about 75 cm (30 in), including tail. All species are native to the Americas, where they inhabit a variety of different environments.

Recent genetic research suggests that an extinct group of giant armoured mammals, the glyptodonts, should be included within the lineage of armadillos, having diverged some 35 million years ago, much more recently than previously assumed.

**Biology**

History

Armadillos originated in South America. Due to the continent's former isolation, they were confined there for most of the Cenozoic. The recent formation of the Isthmus of Panama allowed a few members of the family to migrate northward into southern North America by the early Pleistocene, as part of the Great American Interchange.

Distribution

Today, all extant armadillo species are still present in South America. They are particularly diverse in Paraguay (where 11 species exist) and surrounding areas. Many species are endangered. Some, including four species of Dasypus, are widely distributed over the Americas, whereas others, such as Yepes's mulita, are restricted to small ranges. Two species, the northern naked-tailed armadillo and nine-banded armadillo, are found in Central America; the latter has also reached the United States, primarily in the south-central states (notably Texas), but with a range that extends as far east as South Carolina and Florida, and as far north as Nebraska and central Indiana. Their range has consistently expanded in North America over the last century due to a lack of natural predators.

Types

Armadillos are small to medium-sized mammals. The smallest species, the pink fairy armadillo, is roughly chipmunk-sized at 85 g (3.0 oz) and 13–15 cm (5.1–5.9 in) in total length. The largest species, the giant armadillo, can be the size of a small pig and weigh up to 54 kg (119 lb), and can be 150 cm (59 in) long.

Habitat

They are prolific diggers. Many species use their sharp claws to dig for food, such as grubs, and to dig dens. The nine-banded armadillo prefers to build burrows in moist soil near the creeks, streams, and arroyos around which it lives and feeds.

Diet

The diets of different armadillo species vary, but consist mainly of insects, grubs, and other invertebrates. Some species, however, feed almost entirely on ants and termites.

Anatomy

In common with other xenarthrans, armadillos, in general, have low body temperatures of 33–36 °C (91–97 °F) and low basal metabolic rates (40–60% of that expected in placental mammals of their mass). This is particularly true of types that specialize in using termites as their primary food source.

Armadillos have very poor eyesight, and use their keen sense of smell to hunt for food. They use their claws for digging and finding food, as well as for making their homes in burrows. They dig their burrows with their claws, making only a single corridor the width of the animal's body. They have five clawed toes on their hind feet, and three to five toes with heavy digging claws on their fore feet. Armadillos have a large number of cheek teeth which are not divided into premolars and molars, but usually have no incisors or canines.

The armour is formed by plates of dermal bone covered in relatively small, overlapping epidermal scales called "scutes", composed of bone with a covering of horn. Most species have rigid shields over the shoulders and hips, with a number of bands separated by flexible skin covering the back and flanks. Additional armour covers the top of the head, the upper parts of the limbs, and the tail. The underside of the animal is never armoured, and is simply covered with soft skin and fur.

Defense

This armour-like skin appears to be the main defense of many armadillos, although most escape predators by fleeing (often into thorny patches, from which their armour protects them) or digging to safety. Only the South American three-banded armadillos (Tolypeutes) rely heavily on their armour for protection. When threatened by a predator, Tolypeutes species frequently roll up into a ball. Other armadillo species cannot roll up because they have too many plates. The North American nine-banded armadillo tends to jump straight in the air when surprised, so consequently often collides with the undercarriage or fenders of passing vehicles.

Armadillos have short legs, but can move quite quickly. The nine-banded armadillo is noted for its movement through water which is accomplished via two different methods: it can walk underwater for short distances, holding its breath for as long as six minutes; also, to cross larger bodies of water, it is capable of increasing its buoyancy by swallowing air, inflating its stomach and intestines.

Reproduction

Gestation lasts from 60 to 120 days, depending on species, although the nine-banded armadillo also exhibits delayed implantation, so the young are not typically born for eight months after mating. Most members of the genus Dasypus give birth to four monozygotic young (that is, identical quadruplets), but other species may have typical litter sizes that range from one to eight. The young are born with soft, leathery skin which hardens within a few weeks. They reach sexual maturity in three to 12 months, depending on the species. Armadillos are solitary animals that do not share their burrows with other adults.

The nine-banded armadillo serves science through its unusual reproductive system, in which four genetically identical offspring are born, the result of one original egg. Because they are always genetically identical, the group of four young provides a good subject for scientific, behavioral, or medical tests that need consistent biological and genetic makeup in the test subjects. This is the only reliable manifestation of polyembryony in the class Mammalia, and exists only within the genus Dasypus and not in all armadillos, as is commonly believed.

**Eating**

During the Great Depression, East Texans stocked their larders with armadillos, which they called "Hoover hogs" because of the animal's supposed pork-like flavor (some say chicken-like) and because they considered President Herbert Hoover responsible for the depression. Currently, barbecued armadillo and armadillo chili are popular foods at various festivals in parts of Texas, Arkansas, and the southeastern United States.

There is only one way to roast a big hairy armadillo, just ask the Argentinians. Communities in that country have been cooking the armored mammals the same way for 9,000 years: flipping them on their backs and roasting them in their shell.

Armadillo remains found at 10 hunter-gatherer archaeological sites, dating between 9,000 and 6,000 years ago, left researchers guessing about how the critters got there: Were they cooked and eaten? Did the animals find their way to the site afterwards? Perhaps humans built a cooking hearth above animal remains, causing them to char.

In northern Argentina, some communities continue to cook armadillos in this way, hinting that the animals were killed and cooked for their meat, as a supplement to larger game like deer.

Food Safety

Armadillos are particularly susceptible to leprosy due to their unusually low body temperature, which is hospitable to the leprosy bacterium, Mycobacterium leprae. (The leprosy bacterium is difficult to culture and armadillos have a body temperature of 34 °C (93 °F), similar to human skin.) Humans can acquire a leprosy infection from armadillos by handling them or consuming armadillo meat. Prior to the arrival of Europeans in the late 15th century, leprosy was unknown in the New World. Given that armadillos are native to the New World, at some point they must have acquired the disease from old-world humans.

To get sick, several things have to go wrong. Once people decide to eat the meat, then they have to undercook it – because thorough cooking will quickly kill the bacteria. Even then, people also need to be unlucky, since most armadillos do NOT carry the disease, and most people are immune to it.

Recipes

Baked Armadillo

1 armadillo (or more if you have a crowd), removed from shell

Salt

Pepper

Chunks of apple & pineapple (about 1 1/2 c. each)

1/2 c. butter

An armadillo produces a lot of meat. The smaller ones are best for frying; the older ones need to be cooked slowly for a long time to ensure tenderness. After cutting carcass out of the shell, thoroughly wash meat. Salt and pepper armadillo. Stuff with chunks of apple and pineapple. Coat with butter and wrap in foil and place in roasting pan. Bake in a 325 degree oven until internal temperature reaches 180 degrees. Allow 30-45 minutes per pound. Allow 1/3 pound of meat per serving.

Armadillo Fricassee

1 armadillo, cut into pieces

2 med. potatoes

2 onions, sliced

2 carrots, coin chopped

1 stalk celery, chopped

1 bay leaf

1/4 tsp. thyme

1/2 c. butter

1/2 c. flour

1/2 tsp. salt

1/4 tsp. pepper

Dust armadillo meat in flour, salt, and pepper. Brown on both sides in the butter. Put enough water in pot to cover after adding remaining vegetables. Cover and simmer until meat is tender, about 2 hours. Add seasoned flour and water to thicken liquid.

Texas Armadillo

1 1/4 cup dry white wine

1/2 cup oil

2 cloves garlic, crushed (optional)

1/4 cup butter

salt and pepper, to taste

1/2 teaspoon thyme

1/2 teaspoon rosemary

1 medium onion, sliced thin

1 armadillo, cleaned and cut into serving pieces

1 1/4 cup light cream

1 tablespoon brown mustard

1 tablespoon cornstarch

Mix all ingredients of marinade and add armadillo. Marinate about 8 hours, turning meat occasionally. Remove armadillo and reserve marinade. Melt butter in deep skillet and brown armadillo pieces. Pour in marinade and bring to a boil. Stir in seasoning, cover and simmer until tender (about 1 to 1 1/4 hours.) Remove skillet from the fire and place armadillo pieces on a warmed platter. Mix mustard and cornstarch, then mix in cream. Return skillet to low heat and stir in this mixture a little at a time. Stir sauce until hot, but not boiling, and thickened. Pour sauce over armadillo. Serve with steamed rice.

Armadillo in Mustard Sauce

1 1/4 cups dry white wine

1/2 cup oil

2 garlic cloves, crushed (optional)

1/4 cup butter

Salt and pepper to taste

1/2 tsp. thyme

1/2 tsp. rosemary

1 med. onion, sliced thin

1 armadillo, cleaned and cut into serving pieces

1 1/4 cups light cream

1 tbsp. brown mustard (e.g. Gulden's) or Poupon Dijon

1 tbsp. cornstarch

Mix all ingredients of marinade and add armadillo. Marinate about 8 hrs., turning meat occasionally. Remove armadillo and reserve marinade. Melt butter in deep skillet and brown armadillo pieces. Pour in marinade and bring to a boil. Stir in seasoning, cover and simmer until tender (about 1 - 1 1/4 hours.) Remove skillet from the fire and place armadillo pieces on a warmed platter. Mix mustard and cornstarch, then mix in cream. Return skillet to low heat and stir in this mixture a little at a time. Stir sauce until hot, but not boiling, and thickened. Pour sauce over armadillo. Serve with steamed rice.

Sally's Armadillo Something or Other

1 Armadillo

1/2c Salad oil

3/4c Vinegar

2c Water

1tb Salt

1 Onion sliced

1/2c Salad oil

1lb Smoked pork sausage Cut into bite size pieces

2lg Onions chopped

4 Stalks celery, chopped

1 lg Bell pepper, chopped

2 Cloves garlic, chopped

1 sm Can mushroom steak sauce

4tb Worcestershire

1tb Monosodium glutamate

1 lg Can mushrooms

1 ½ c Dry red wine

1 bunch Parsley, chopped

1 bunch Green onions, chopped

1 Lemon

Armadillo is cleaned similarly to turtle. Clean and cut into serving pieces. Marinate the meat in a sauce made by combining salad oil, vinegar, water, salt and onion. Marinate for 24 hours. Drain meat and place in a glass container. Pour 1 quart of red wine over meat and let it stand for 6 to 8 hours in refrigerator. Remove meat and let drain for 1 hour. Place oil in black iron pot brown sausage and armadillo. Remove armadillo, but leave sausage in the pot. Add onion, celery, bell pepper, garlic and saute with sausage until vegetables are tender. Add the steak sauce, Worcestershire, salt pepper and monosodium glutamate. Stir until well mixed. Put armadillo meat back into pot. Add enough water to cover meat. Bring to a boil. Reduce heat and simmer covered for one hour. Turn pot by handle back and forth to stir. Add mushrooms and wine, slowly stirring them into pot. Sprinkle parsley and onion tops and lay thin lemon slices on top. Simmer without cover for 10 to 15 minutes. Serve over rice.

**Consistent items across all pages**

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