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INVASION OF HUMBOLDT AND DEL NORTE COUNTIES OF NORTHWESTERN CALIFORNIA BY PORCUPINES

CHARLES F. YOCOM

Abstract

From 1953 to the present, the writer has been interested in the ingress of porcupines into redwood and Douglas fir forests of northwestern California. The first known observation of a porcupine seen in Humboldt County occurred in 1908 on the Harrow Ranch near Ettersburg. The second record was about 1930 at the Humboldt-Trinity County Line on Lassic Peak, 10 miles west of Ruth, Trinity County. The third record was in July 1941 on the Redwood Creek drainage. The first known record for Del Norte County was about 1930 when William Stevens observed one on the old Ship Mountain Trail (R 4E—T 16N). Few records have been obtained for the 1940's and early 1950's, but from the late 1950's on there are numerous records for both counties.

The spread of porcupines appears to have been associated with the cutting of the virgin stands of redwood and Douglas fir forests. An abundance of food was created by plant succession which resulted from logging; thus, porcupines invaded the entire area even to the ocean beaches.

Fig. 1 shows location and dates of porcupine records, and Fig. 2 shows the lumber production in board feet by years for Humboldt County. Mass harvest of Douglas fir inland from the coast started after World War II and reached maximum production about 1960.

The first record that I have for porcupines (*Erethizon dorsatum*) in northwestern California is for southern Humboldt County. Mr. A. Henry Tosten, Miranda, California, wrote in 1960:

“My earliest recollection of a porcupine seen in this area was about 1908 taken in a steeltrap by one of the Harrow boys on the Harrow Ranch, about five miles north of Ettersburg.

For many years, so far as I know, they were very scarce; however, in the last few years there has been quite a number seen near the Bear Buttes five miles west of Miranda.”

The J. C. Albee family homesteaded near the Humboldt-Trinity county line near Lassic Peak in 1879. Jack Albee's sheep dog found the first porcupine seen or known about by members of this family in brush at 4,000 feet elevation on Lassic Peak about 1930 approximately 10 miles west of Ruth, Trinity County.

James Gilman, Biologist for California Fish and Game, was raised in the headwaters of the North Fork of the Eel River, about four miles east of Zenia Guard Station, Trinity County. The first porcupine seen by him or his family was in the Hidden Valley area (T 1N - R 7E, Sect. 28) about 8 miles east of Mad River Ranger Station, Trinity County, 1940.

Knowles Clark, “an old timer” of the Petrolia area, wrote in 1960 that he knew of two porcupines seen in that area in the 66 years that he had lived there.

Douglas Pine, formerly Farm Advisor for Humboldt County, told me that he recalled some trouble with porcupines in the Fort Baker area north of Bridgeville, Humboldt County, in the late 1930's or early 1940's.

The first record that I have for porcupines in Del Norte County is for the 1930's (Fig. 1).

From these records, one can see that porcupines were not in the redwood regions of Humboldt and Del Norte counties in the early days, and

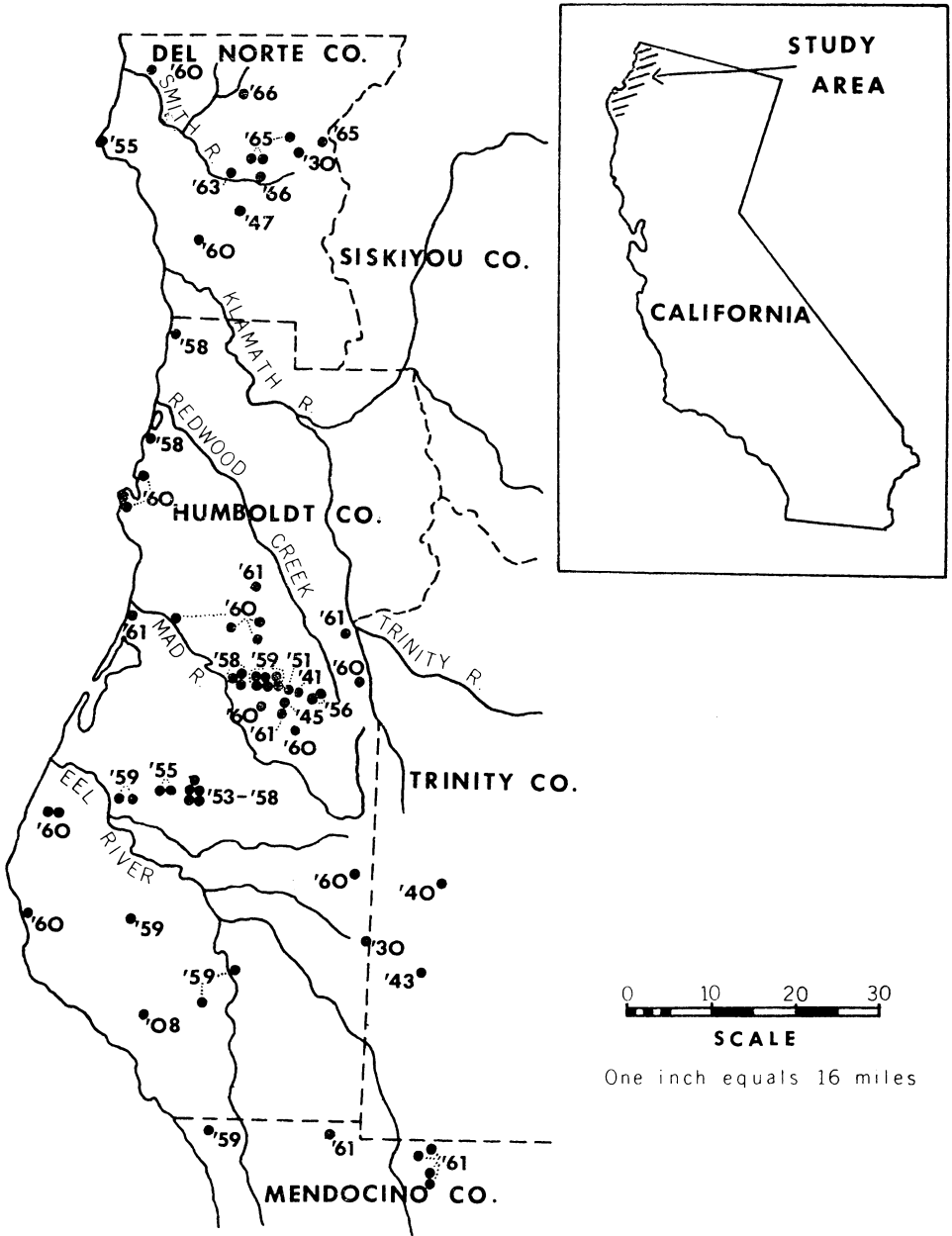


Fig. 1. Dots indicate areas where porcupines have been seen and the numbers near the dots indicate the year that the animals were observed in Del Norte, Humboldt, northern Mendocino and western Trinity counties in northwestern California.

probably were absent from the entire area prior to the 1900's. If they were here, they were scarce and probably restricted to the southern and southeastern portions of Humboldt County.

During and after the 1950's, they successfully inhabited the two coastal counties (Fig. 1). The population density markedly increased about 1960. Darrel Cussins, a County Trapper, also noted this trend. He wrote in 1960 the following:

“. . . the porcupine population in the coast area seems to be on the increase. I have killed quite a number of them in the Ettersburg, Elk Ridge, and Panther Gap areas. Quite recently, I killed two on the Wildcat, back of Ferndale near the coast.

There are a few, not many, on Rainbow and very few in the Petrolia area, Apple Tree, and Taylor's Peak.

I have been in nearly all areas of the County (Humboldt), and they are getting quite plentiful around Showers Pass (north of Bridgeville), Maple Creek (part of Mad River drainage), Redwood Creek, Bridgeville, and Blocksburg.

In fact, the two I killed near Ferndale were the first I have ever known this close to the coast in this area."

Records became so numerous for Humboldt County after 1961 that I have not plotted them on the map (Fig. 1). I have several recent records of porcupines in Arcata, on the Humboldt State College campus, Eureka and even on the sandy beaches.

This population explosion must have occurred because of a great increase in food supplies resulting from the rapid cutting of virgin stands of Douglas fir forests inland, continued increased cutting of old stands of redwood forests and recent cuttings of second growth redwoods along the Eel River drainage, Mad River, Redwood Creek, Klamath, Crescent City, and Smith River areas, Black-tail deer responded to these cuttings and we now have more deer in these two counties than in previous times.

Cutting of redwoods started in the Humboldt Bay area in 1851 and lumber production rose steadily until 1920 (Fig. 2). Industrial expansion virtually ceased during the depression years of the 1930's and then expanded again after 1945. In 1946, nationwide demand for lumber brought loggers to Humboldt County, attracted by the untapped stands of Douglas fir (Vaux, 1955). By 1953, lumber production in Humboldt County was 4.5 times as great as it had been in 1940. In 1942, there were 30 active sawmills in Humboldt County; six of these were large mills cutting more than 25 million board feet of lumber a year, most of which was redwood. By 1951, there were still only 31 mills cutting mostly redwood.

Douglas fir mills started from a handful of small ones in 1942; and, by 1951, there were about 120 small plants producing about 2.5 million board feet of lumber per mill. These mills were located along railroads and highways in the county (Vaux, 1955). The total lumber production of all species of trees rose to an estimated 2500-plus million board feet by 1960, and since then has been decreasing because most of the Douglas fir on private ranches had been cut (Fig. 2).

The same harvest of redwoods and Douglas fir occurred about the same time in Del Norte and Mendocino counties. Douglas fir harvest expanded into Trinity County after 1945.

Humboldt, Del Norte, and Mendocino counties have 7 major types of vegetation — redwood forests, Douglas fir forests, mountain forests, wood-

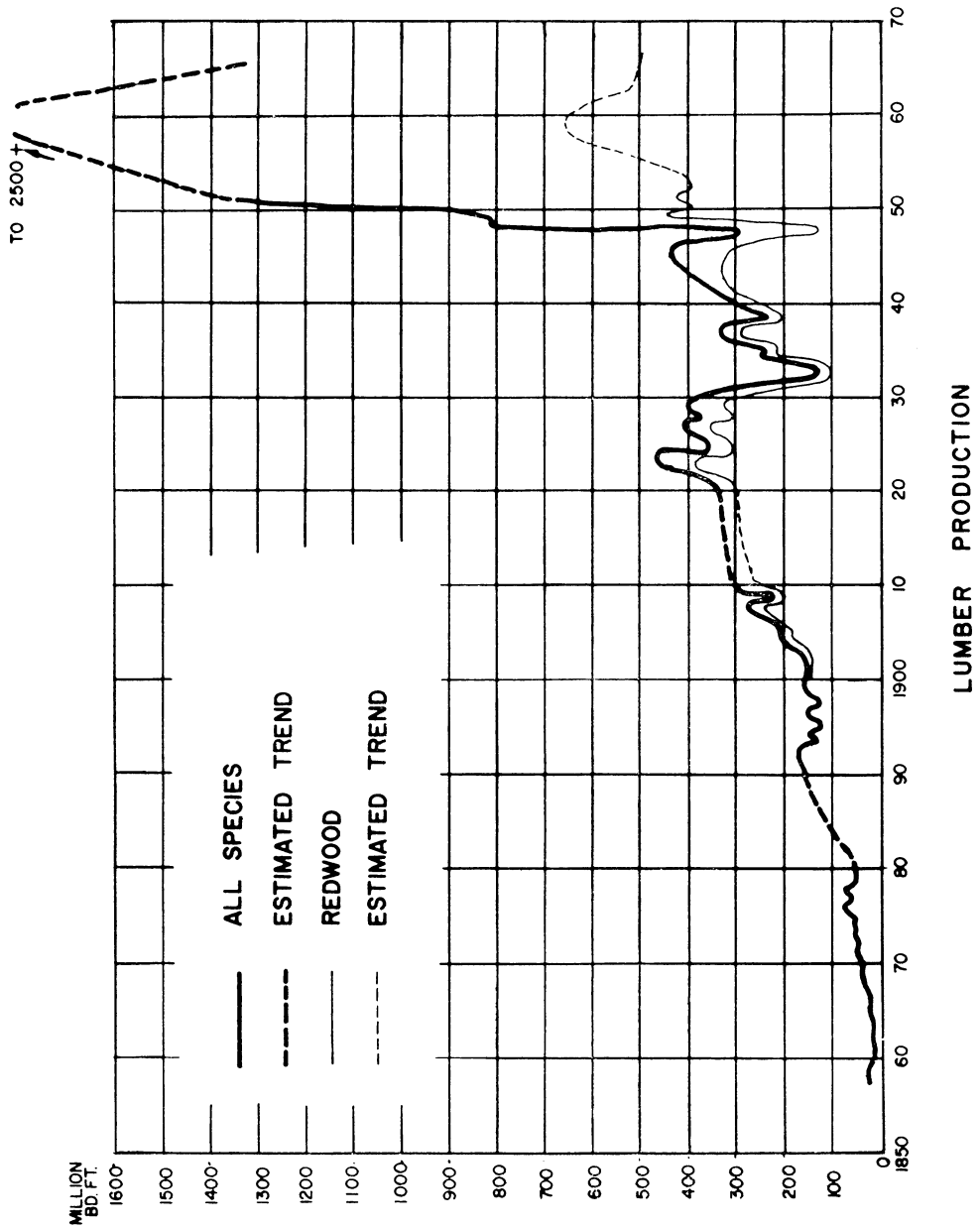


Fig. 2. Lumber production in board feet of redwood and all species of trees in Humboldt County, California, from 1850 to 1965. This graph has been modified from Vaux (1955).

land prairie, coastal brush fields, coastal dunes, and urban agriculture (Yocom and Dasmann, 1957). The redwood forest type is mainly along the coast and river valleys extending inland usually no more than 20 miles. Douglas fir forest type is usually at higher elevations and inland. Woodland prairies occur along the ridges and on south and west slopes consisting of oaks, grasses, forbs, and sedges (Yocom and Dasmann, 1957) Coastal hard-

wood forests, as such, are nowhere widespread in these counties, but occur interspersed among the coniferous forests. Hardwood stands often replace coniferous forests following logging and fire.

Porcupines must have moved west in the 1920's from Siskiyou County into Del Norte County and in the early 1900's from Trinity or Mendocino counties into southern and southeastern Humboldt County. The mass cutting of Douglas fir forests apparently triggered population increases and caused migration of porcupines into all of Humboldt and Del Norte counties in the late 1950's and during the 1960's. Also, the carrying capacity of the land in the two counties for porcupines must have been increased through succession. Obviously, stands of old growth redwood and Douglas fir have little food for porcupines. — School of Natural Resources, Humboldt State College, Arcata, California, September 1, 1970.

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PORCUPINE RECORDS FOR HUMBOLDT AND DEL NORTE COUNTIES AND ADJACENT AREAS

Humboldt County

<i>Date</i>	<i>Location</i>
1908	One trapped, Harrow Ranch, 5 miles north of Etnersburg (A. Henry Tosten)
1930	Sheep dog found one in brush at 4,000 ft. elevation, Lassic Peak on Humboldt-Trinity county line (Jack Albee)
July 1941	One seen, Redwood Creek Slope (Guy B. Kerr)
Aug. 1945	Two killed in pear trees, Maple Creek Slope (Guy B. Kerr)
July 1951	One trapped, Maple Creek Slope (Guy B. Kerr)
1951	One seen, ¾ miles north of New Harris Store (Wm. Drewry)
1953-1958	Several seen by various people, Camp Bemis area, T 1N, R 2E, Sect. 2
1955	Several seen, 3 miles west of Bridgeville on Bar W Ranch in Douglas fir (David Crane)
Autumn 1956	Road kill, Junction U. S. Highway 101 and High Rock Road (Jack Cullmber)
Sept. 1956	One seen, Panther Creek area, T 5N, R 4E, Sect. 27
3 Oct. 1958	Road kill, south of Maple Creek in Big Bend area of Mad River drainage (Calif. Fish & Game personnel)
11 Nov. 1958	One seen in a Spruce grove along beach at mouth of Butler Creek, Prairie Creek State Park (Dale Crane)
July 1959	Four road kills, Maple Creek area (Guy B. Kerr)
July 1959	One seen, in Tanoak tree, Maple Creek area (Guy B. Kerr)
Aug. 1959	One seen, Grizzly Creek Redwoods State Park (Douglas W. Metcalf)
Aug. 1959	Road kill, north of Phillipsville on U. S. Highway 101
Aug. 1959	Road kill, Franklin K. Lane Grove near Phillipsville (Carl A. Anderson)
16 Sept. 1959	One dead, upper Bear River, south of Scotia (Calif. Fish & Game Personnel)
25 Sept. 1959	One seen, Snow Camp Lake (M. J. McHugh)
11 Nov. 1959	One seen, 1 mile north of Three Forks Summit (Calif. Fish and Game personnel)
May 1960	Road kill, Chezem Bros. Ranch on U. S. Highway 299, Redwood Creek (Roy Killion)
June 1960	One seen, crossing U. S. Highway 101, Big Lagoon (Darrell Card)
June 1960	One shot, Wildcat area near the coast, south of Ferndale (Darrell Cussins)
Sept. 1960	One killed, Sea Lion Flat, 1 mile south of Punta Gordo old lighthouse station (Walter Beatty)
Sept. 1960	Five killed, Buckeye Ridge area, southeast of Petrolia (Calvin Stewart)
1 Sept. 1960	One seen, Patrick's Point State Park, near Wedding Rock (Charles E. Doll)

- 3 Sept. 1960 One seen, in road between Ferndale and Petrolia near Radar Station (Ruth Elliott)
- 21 Sept. 1960 One seen, Highway 36, ¼ mile west of Trinity County line (Calif. Fish & Game personnel)
- 25 Sept. 1960 One seen, on ground in Douglas fir stand, Grouse Mtn. area
- 25 Sept. 1960 One seen, 4 miles south of U. S. Highway 299 on Redwood Creek (Thomas Harper)
- 25 Sept. 1960 One seen, Kerr Ranch area, Mad River drainage (M. J. McHugh)
- 1 Oct. 1960 Road kill, 1 mile east of Redwood Creek on Highway 299 (Calif. Fish & Game personnel)
- Oct. 1960 Road kill, Redwood Creek on U. S. Highway 299.
- Oct. 1960 One seen, Russ Ranch, 3 miles south of U. S. Highway 299, Redwood Creek area
- Nov. 1960 One shot, Moody Ranch, 28 miles northeast of Garberville (William Drewry)
- 23 Sept. 1961 One seen, 2 miles north of Lack Mtn. (Douglas Houston)
- 7 Oct. 1961 One dead, Friday Ridge Road near Brush Mtn. southwest of Willow Creek (Richard Ridenhour)
- 15 Oct. 1961 One seen, ½ mile southeast of Taylor Ridge (James Brady)
- Oct. 1961 Road kill, 1 mile north of Arcata on U. S. Highway 101.
- 1 Nov. 1961 One seen, Grouse Mtn. (O. E. Larochelle)

Del Norte County

- | <i>Date</i> | <i>Location</i> |
|--------------|---|
| About 1930 | Several carcasses apparently killed by cougar, Ship Mountain Trail, R 4E, T 16N (William Stevens) |
| 1946-1947 | Several living in Knobcone pine, Summit Valley Trail, 4,000 ft. elevation, between Buck Creek and Eight Mile Creek, R 3E, T 14N (William Stevens) |
| 9 Sept. 1960 | One seen, in Redwoods, Turwur Creek Drainage, Del Norte County (Calif. Fish & Game personnel) |
| 1960 | Dog found one under a porch in town of Smith River (Willis Height) |
| 1963 | One crossed road, South Fork Road, R 2E, T 15N, Sect. 23 (William and Robert Stevens) |
| July 1965 | One shot, Ship Mountain Trail near Bear Basin Road R4E, T 16N, Sect. 1 (Jerry Lewis) |
| July 1965 | One shot, near Doe Flat near Del Norte-Siskiyou County Line R 4E, T 16N, Sect. 7 (Jerry Lewis) |
| Oct. 1965 | Two seen on trail, Fox Ridge, R 3E, T 15N, Sect. 7 (William Stevens) |
| 1966 | One shot, at Base Creek-Knopki Creek junction, R 4E, T 18N at corners of Sect. 14, 15, 18 and 19 (Jerry Lewis) |

Mendocino County

- | <i>Date</i> | <i>Location</i> |
|---------------|---|
| 6 Aug. 1959 | First one observed in that area, Standish Hickey State Park, near Leggett (Garland Gray) |
| Sept. 1959 | One seen, Skunk Springs, 5 miles east of Leggett on U. S. Highway 101 (Everett Ingerham) |
| Jan. 1961 | One shot, 9 miles southeast of Harris at Jewett Rock (William Drewry) |
| 18 April 1961 | One seen, between Mina and Covelo (William Drewry) |
| 17 April 1961 | One trapped, north of Covelo (Charles Wilson) |
| 24 April 1961 | One shot, Shubeck Ridge, northwest of Mina near Humboldt-Mendocino County Line (Charles Wilson) |
| 1960-1961 | Wilson killed about 50 porcupines per year in the Mina area |

Trinity County

- | <i>Date</i> | <i>Location</i> |
|---------------|--|
| 1930 | First record for that area, sheep dog found one in brush at 4,000 feet elevation, Lassic Peak, Trinity-Humboldt County Line (Jack Albee) |
| 1940 | One seen, Hidden Valley, T 1N, R 7E, Sect. 28, about 8 miles east of Mad River Guard Station (James Gilman) |
| 1943 | First observation of 2 young at den in a rock pile on open ridge, 6 miles northwest of Ruth |
| 18 April 1961 | One seen, near Kettenpom (William Drewry) |
| Oct. 1961 | Road kill, northeast of Weaverville on U. S. Highway 299 |