

Name: _____

Armored Animal

by Guy Belleranti

What mammal lives only in the Americas, looks a little like a monster-sized pillbug, and wears a coat of armor on its back, head, legs, and tail? An armadillo, of course.



What is an armadillo's armor like?

The armadillo's armor is made up of plates of skin-covered bone. Between these bony sections are flexible bands of skin. Hair grows through the skin on these bands and also on the animal's sides and much softer belly. How many bands an armadillo has depends upon the species.

Where do armadillos live? Wild armadillos live in the grasslands, forests, and deserts of North and South America. One species, the nine-banded armadillo, has extended its range as far north as the United States. They can be found in several states, including Texas, Florida, Georgia, and the Carolinas. Most other species live in South America, with some also in Central America and Mexico.

How big are they? The smallest armadillo, the pink fairy armadillo, is only six inches long. Meanwhile, the giant armadillo can be five feet long and weigh up to 100 pounds! The nine-banded variety that is found in the United States can grow up to two feet long and weigh up to 22 pounds.

Can they roll up in a ball to protect themselves from predators? While the animal's armor provides some protection, only the small three-banded armadillo can roll into a complete ball. Other species escape predators like wild cats and birds of prey by racing into thorny bushes or by burrowing into the ground with their sharp claws. In fact, most armadillos sleep in the warmth of an underground burrow.

What do armadillos eat? Their main diet consists of insects. Using their nose for smelling and their claws for digging, armadillos find beetles, ants and termites and pull them into their mouths with their worm-like tongues. Armadillos also eat plants, fruit, eggs, and small animals, both alive and dead.

What time of day does an armadillo search for food? Well, that depends on the season. Armadillos don't do well in cold weather, so in winter they come out more during the warmth of day. In summer they become more nocturnal, coming out during the night or at dusk or dawn.

Do armadillos swim? You'd think swimming with a suit of armor would be hard. However, by gulping air into their digestive tract armadillos are able to stay afloat as they paddle. Armadillos can also go underwater and walk along a stream bottom for up to six minutes.

Do armadillos live in groups? Armadillos tend to be solitary. However, when it's cold they do sometimes group together.



What are baby armadillos like? At birth an armadillo's armor is soft and leathery. It hardens as the animal grows. Armadillo mothers give birth to differing numbers of young depending upon the species. The nine-banded armadillo always has four identical babies, either four brothers or four sisters.

Are armadillos endangered? The nine-banded variety is not endangered, and their numbers are growing. Most other armadillo varieties are decreasing in number. They've lost habitat to farms and other human settlements. Also, armadillos are often hit by cars while crossing roads. A few people even hunt them for food.

About the Author

Guy Belleranti works as a docent at Reid Park Zoo in Tucson, Arizona. The information in this article comes mainly from his experiences working with animals and teaching others.

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1. An armadillo's diet is mainly composed of...
 - a. eggs
 - b. fruit
 - c. plants
 - d. insects

2. Can armadillos roll up in a ball to protect themselves from predators?
 - a. Most species of armadillos can roll up into a ball to protect themselves.
 - b. Only baby armadillos can roll up into a ball to protect themselves.
 - c. Only adult armadillos can roll up into a ball to protect themselves.
 - d. Only one species of armadillo can roll up into a ball for protection.

3. Name two natural predators of armadillos mentioned in the article.

_____ and _____

4. Armadillos in the United States are...
 - a. do not have as much armor as South American armadillos
 - b. not endangered
 - c. only found in Texas and Florida
 - d. found in every state except Alaska and Hawaii

5. An adult armadillo in the United States would probably measure about...
 - a. 60 inches long
 - b. six inches long
 - c. 24 inches long
 - d. twelve inches long

5. An armadillo is a...
 - a. reptile
 - b. amphibian
 - c. arthropod
 - d. mammal

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Match each vocabulary word from the article with the correct definition.

_____ 1. pillbug

_____ 2. flexible

_____ 3. burrowing

_____ 4. armor

_____ 5. dusk

_____ 6. dawn

_____ 7. solitary

_____ 8. decreasing

a. diminishing; going down in number

b. hard surface used for protection

c. time of day shortly before the sun rises

d. twilight

e. small animal that can roll up into a ball for protection

f. digging a hole or tunnel in the ground

g. bendable

h. alone

◆ Now try this: On a sheet of lined paper, use each vocabulary word from above in a sentence.

ANSWER KEY

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