

## Wildlife Damage Management Fact Sheet Series

# Striped Skunks

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The striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*), a member of the family Mephitidae, is well known for the potent, musky odor it emits from its two anal glands as a defense against possible predators. The skunk, which is the size of a large house cat, is typically jet black in color with a prominent white stripe that begins at the back of the head and splits into two lateral stripes that run down the back and sometimes onto the tail. Cream-colored, brown, and black skunks may be observed occasionally. Silver and albino skunks also occur but are rare. The skunk's body is stout with a triangular head, round ears, and a long, bushy tail that accounts for almost half its body length (20–30 inches). Skunks provide ecological and economic benefits to humans because they eat rodents and insects.



### General Biology

Skunks mate between late February and late March and, after a gestation period of 62 to 75 days, give birth to four to seven young in May or early June. Young skunks begin to walk when they are five weeks old and are completely weaned by two months of age, at which time they begin leaving the den to accompany the adult female on hunting trips. At three months of age, the young are independent. Musk is present in skunks at birth, and young skunks can use their paired scent glands when they are two to four weeks old.

Skunks are mild-mannered, slow-moving, nonaggressive animals. They make a variety of sounds, including teeth click-

ing, hissing, growling, grunts, snarls, purrs, squeals, and shrill screeches. They will often ignore intruders even in close proximity unless disturbed. When cornered or closely pursued, a skunk will face the intruder, arch its back, raise its tail, stamp the ground with its feet, and shuffle backwards. Just before spraying, the skunk bends into a "U" shape so that both its head and tail ends face the intended target. The musk is released either as a fine spray or as a stream of

drops and can reach distances up to 16 feet. Skunk musk is an oily, yellowish, phosphorescent substance that sometimes contains small yellowish curds. The entire contents of the scent glands may not be discharged at once, allowing the skunk to spray its attacker again if necessary.

Although skunks do not truly hibernate in winter, they become inactive, falling into a deep sleep for long periods (75–100 days). They do emerge periodically during winter when there is a break in cold weather. Skunks may lose up to 38 percent of their body weight during this time.

Skunks live only about two years in the wild. Common causes of mortality include pneumonia, distemper, rabies, vehicle accidents, and sometimes starvation. Great-horned owls are one of the few effective predators of skunks.

### Habitat and Food Habits

The striped skunk prefers clearings, cropland, pastures, and other open lands bordering wooded or brushy areas. Skunks are nocturnal and spend their nights searching for food along woodland, brushland, or wetland borders; along fencerows or wooded ravines; or near stream edges. During the day skunks den in abandoned woodchuck or fox burrows, culverts or hollow logs, or under lumber piles, porches, sheds, and other outbuildings. Occasionally skunks will dig their own shallow dens. Although skunks are not sociable animals, two to seven females may den with one male in the winter for warmth.

Skunks spend most of their lives in a small area, usually within 1 mile of their den. Males, however, may travel greater distances during the breeding season in late winter. Population densities may be as low as 2 and as high as 50 animals per square mile, and populations fluctuate greatly from year to year. Skunk densities are often highest in suburban areas where there are relatively few predators and food is ample.

Skunks are omnivorous and have a highly variable diet that changes throughout the seasons. Foods include plants, berries, insects, crustaceans, small mammals, birds, eggs, amphibians, fish, and carrion. Like many other animals, skunks are opportunists, eating garbage and pet food left outdoors in urban and suburban areas.

### **Description of Damage**

Skunks occasionally feed on garden crops in suburban areas and will take the lower ears of sweet corn, finely shredding the husk. Most damage to such crops, however, is caused by other species such as deer, raccoons, or birds. For example, if the stalk has been knocked over or corn has been removed from its upper portion, the damage is probably not being caused by a skunk.

Beehives are an attractive source of honey and insects, and conflicts often arise when skunks scratch the front of a hive and snag the bees as they exit.

Skunks may damage turf in yards and golf courses when they dig for grubs, leaving small upturned patches of sod and 3- to 4-inch funnel-like holes dug into the soil.

They will kill poultry and eat the eggs. Although they do not climb fencing, they will crawl underneath it to gain access to the pens. Eggs destroyed by skunks are typically crushed at one end with shell fragments pushed inward. In contrast, raccoons will remove one end of the shell without crushing the egg, foxes will carry the eggs away and store them for later, and weasels and mink will crush the entire egg. In addition, skunks kill only one or two birds at a time, whereas other species will kill several.

### **The Skunk's Odor**

Most people try to avoid skunks because of the nauseating odor. The odor can be experienced indirectly such as when a skunk takes up residence under building foundations, under porches or outbuildings, or in someone's yard. This is particularly common in late winter and early spring, which is the skunk's breeding season. People or their pets may also be sprayed directly, which causes irritation to mucous membranes around the eyes, nose, and mouth. Humans can experience temporary blindness for 10 or 15 minutes as a result of being sprayed in the eyes, and the musk is extremely irritating and painful. Skunks will not spray unless they feel threatened, so avoid making loud noises and quick, aggressive movements when confronting a skunk. Back away slowly and quietly.

### **Laws and Regulations**

Skunks are protected furbearers in New York and there are established hunting and trapping seasons, although very few persons hunt them. A trapping license is required to trap skunks unless they are causing damage or have become a nuisance. Current New York State Environmental Conservation Law (Section 11-0523) states that skunks that are injuring property or have become a nuisance may be taken at any time in any manner. Any skunks taken under these laws and outside the open season must be immediately buried or cremated or released alive somewhere on the property. They may not be transported alive or dead away from the property where the damage occurs. Licensed nuisance wildlife control operators may transport wildlife off of the property and will do so for a fee. Contact your local Department of Environmental Conservation office for the name of a licensed nuisance wildlife control operator in your area.

When using a firearm or trapping to manage skunk problems, you must follow local ordinances. It is best to consult with local law enforcement authorities if you have questions regarding the laws of a specific municipality. In other states, consult with the state wildlife agency about laws and regulations pertaining to skunks before shooting or trapping nuisance animals.

### **Preventing Damage**

#### **Population Reduction**

Live traps (10 x 10 x 30 inches) baited with sardines, fish-flavored cat food, or peanut butter can be set near the den entrance to capture skunks. Although skunks can be captured with live traps, most homeowners do not want to risk being sprayed. Because New York Environmental Conservation Law prohibits anyone except nuisance wildlife control operators or wildlife rehabilitators from transporting live-captured animals, the landowner must euthanize captured skunks or release them elsewhere on the property. To avoid the risk of being sprayed, contact a professional or experienced trapper to handle your skunk problems.

#### **Chemicals**

No toxicants or fumigants are currently registered in New York State for skunk control. Paradichlorobenzene, or moth balls, is not registered for use against skunks and, when used in sufficient quantities to be effective, could pose a hazard to human health. Other repellents have been ineffective for skunk control.

#### **Fencing and Other Barriers**

Exclusion is the best way to prevent or reduce encounters with skunks. Skunks generally do not climb, but they can dig below a fence. To prevent skunks from denning under buildings, seal off openings in the foundation with sheet metal, concrete, or wire mesh. Skunks are capable of squeezing through a very small hole or crack, even as small as 4 inches across. Exclude skunks from outbuildings, decks, and porches by constructing a 2-inch wire mesh fence that is at least 3 feet high and extends 1 foot below the ground surface with an additional 6 to 12 inches at the bottom bent outward at a 90-degree angle. This will keep skunks from burrowing under the fence. To make sure that skunks are not trapped under structures, first seal all possible entrances into the area, leaving the main entrance or burrow open. Then sprinkle a thin layer of flour on the ground in front of the opening. After dark, examine the flour for tracks to make certain that the skunk has left. Once the skunk has left the den, cover the remaining entrance immediately.

Reopen the entrance the next day for one hour after dark to allow any remaining skunks to exit before you seal the entrance permanently. An alternative is to install a one-way door at the main opening that will allow skunks to leave but not re-enter. After three or four days, the opening can be permanently sealed. To avoid entrapping young in an area, do not conduct exclusion from May through July when the young are not yet mobile. If entrapped, the young will die of starvation, leading to strong odors of decay.

Beehives can be fenced with chicken wire or 2-inch wire mesh. If hives are protected from bears or livestock by an electric fence, add an additional wire 5 inches above the ground surface to keep skunks out. Elevating the hives to a level of 3 feet is also an effective preventive measure.

Occasionally, a skunk looking for insects or toads will become trapped in a window well. To help the skunk exit safely from the well, nail narrow pieces of lumber at 6-inch intervals to a board and lower it slowly into the well at an angle. This will allow the skunk to climb to safety.

### Cultural Practices

You can take several simple steps to minimize the attractiveness of your property to skunks. Remove obvious sources of food or shelter. Lumber piles, junk cars, and piles of other debris may attract skunks. Avoid leaving pet food outside, and store garbage in metal or plastic containers with tight-fitting lids. Cover compost piles to reduce their attractiveness to skunks and prevent skunk feces from entering the compost. Skunks are often attracted to rodents living in barns, sheds, garages, and other areas. Reducing rodent populations can eliminate this attraction.

### Neutralizing Odors

Several home remedies and commercial products have been found to neutralize skunk odor on your pet, clothing, or in your home.

**Tomato juice and vinegar.** Mix equal parts of tomato juice and vinegar, then soak your pet for at least one hour. Wash the animal with a mild detergent after soaking. Tomato sauce or paste may be substituted for tomato juice.

**Hydrogen peroxide, baking soda, and soap.** Paul Krebaum, a chemist from

Molex in Illinois, developed this home remedy. A 1993 article in *Chemical and Engineering News* listed the following recipe:

1 quart 3% hydrogen peroxide  
1/4 cup baking soda

1 teaspoon liquid soap

Mix these ingredients together and immediately wash your pet or soak your clothing while the solution is bubbling. Rinse with water after washing. Because the mixture generates large amounts of oxygen, do not try to bottle it or it may explode.

**Ammonia or bleach in water—clothing and objects only** (Caution: never combine bleach and ammonia; when combined their resulting fumes are toxic.) To remove musk odor from clothing you can use a solution of ammonia and water or bleach in water. Soak the clothing for several hours, then wash with a mild detergent. These solutions may cause some materials to change color.

**Neutroleum alpha.** This is a popular commercial deodorant that can be obtained from the United States Department of Agriculture Animal Plant and Health Inspection Service, Wildlife Services (USDA-APHIS-WS) Pocatello Supply Depot. It comes in a variety of concentrate sizes ranging from 1/2 pint at \$14.00 each to a gallon at \$151.50. Because it is toxic, special precautions must be taken and dilution is required. Order from Pocatello Supply Depot, 238 E. Dillon Street, Pocatello, ID 83201-6623, phone: 208-236-6920, fax: 208-236-6922.

### Health Concerns

Rabies is a deadly disease caused by a virus that attacks the nervous system. Animals most often infected include raccoons, skunks, foxes, and bats. The virus is present in the saliva and nervous tissue of a rabid animal. Be particularly wary of animals that act strangely, especially those that are unusually tame, aggressive, or appear to be paralyzed. Be suspicious of daytime activity in skunks, which are usually most active at night.

Wild mammals as well as cats, dogs, ferrets, and livestock may contract rabies. Thus it is important to have all dogs and cats regularly vaccinated for rabies. If

your pet has been in a fight with another animal, wear gloves to handle it. Isolate it from other animals and people, and telephone your county health department or animal control officer for instructions.

If you or someone you know is bitten or scratched by a skunk, wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water and contact your physician immediately. Rabies post-exposure vaccinations may be necessary. Consult with your county health department, the N.Y.S. Bureau of Communicable Disease Control (518-474-3186) or, during evenings and weekends, the N.Y.S. Department of Health duty officer (518-465-9720) for additional information.

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