

## **Gardener's Best Friend - Master of Pest Control: The Skunk!**

*by Erika K. Yery, licensed wildlife rehabilitator*

### **Description and Behavior**

The skunk is probably the best known but least understood mammal in North America, and can be found throughout the US, except in desert areas. Four kinds of skunks are native to the United States: most commonly found in Virginia is the Striped Skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*), and occasionally the Eastern Spotted Skunk (*Spilogale putorius*). The other two species are the Hog-Nosed skunk "Rooter Skunk" (*Conepatus mesoleucus*), and the Hooded Skunk (*Mephitis macroura*), which are both confined to the extreme southwest.

Skunks live up to 6 years in the wild, but may live up to 10 years in captivity. All skunk species are cat-size or smaller, have long fur, long bushy tails, and are black and white. The striped skunk usually weighs from 4 to 10 pounds; males are about 10 percent heavier than females, and as much as 8 percent longer. The striped skunk has a magnificent tail - about one-third of the animal's total length. Under the base of the tail, is the skunk's notorious ammunition - two grape-sized glands, one on each side of the anus, which contain a pungent musk that skunks can fire at will, by contracting the surrounding mass of muscle. On each scent gland is a small nipple-like outlet that can be aimed with lightning-speed, and perfect accuracy. Skunks prefer to avoid situations that call for action, but if provoked, may reluctantly let loose a barrage. Usually, the skunk goes through three warnings before resorting to a squirt. First, it stamps its front feet. Then, it raises its tail with the tip downward. The third and final warning, is when the tip rises up and spreads out. At this point, stand perfectly still, and the skunk may change its mind and wander off. Skunks can fire five or six consecutive rounds; each dose is about a fraction of a teaspoon. It will take up to a day to recharge the firepower. The spotted skunk differs in the method how it sprays - it will do a handstand on its forefeet, and spray directly over its head.

Skunks have sharp teeth and long claws for digging. They are nearsighted, but

have a keen sense of smell and hearing. The striped skunk is not a good climber. Although it can climb up wire mesh, fences, and boards, it seldom climbs trees - the long nails are a definite handicap in climbing. The spotted skunk on the other hand, is an excellent climber, able to climb a tree with ease. It can also climb down a tree headfirst.

Skunks are usually silent, but may churr and make grunting sounds while feeding. They can growl, snarl, twitter like a bird, and squeal. Skunks molt their fur just once a year, starting in April. The underfur is not replaced until early fall, although the guard hair is replaced by June. Skunks are nocturnal, and both of the local skunks are most active primarily after dark. The striped skunk is the more crepuscular, often starting to feed in the early evening, and perhaps not hurrying back to its den until sunup. On overcast days in the breeding season, the striped skunk may be out in the day-time looking for a mate, or just because they are hungry after the enforced denning of winter. The spotted skunk rarely comes out while it is light in the evening, and is almost always back in its den before sunup. Since skunks are considered rabies vector species (along with the fox, raccoon, and bats), some people believe that these animals are rabid when they are seen during the day. However, both skunks may be out during the day when their habitat has been destroyed, when they are desperate for food, when youngsters have lost their mother, or when males are seeking females during mating season. Both skunks dislike heat, and neither will be out if they can avoid it on a hot day - their black coats absorb and retain too much heat. Neither skunk is a true hibernator, but will den up for extended periods during severe cold weather.

**Habitat** Skunks prefer semi-open areas, grassy and weedy fields, brushland, pastures, and rural and urban neighborhoods. Usually, they will den close to water. The striped skunk prefers an underground den that is in well-drained soil. Ideal conditions for striped skunks are wooded hillsides, bordering pastures or hayfields. The fields produce the insects that they need for food, the

hillsides the ideal den sites, and the forest prevents the soil from freezing as deeply, making the dens warmer. Most of the earthen dens used by the striped skunks are originally made by groundhogs and red foxes. Most dens taken over from groundhogs have two entrances, whereas dens dug by skunks themselves generally have a single opening. The striped skunk can and does dig its own den when it has to. They will also den under stumps or fallen logs, rock piles, and woodpiles. Spotted skunks like to den in hollow trees, if they can find one.

Due to the loss of habitat, and the competition for open land between wildlife and man, more and more skunks are taking up residence beneath houses, garages, and other outbuildings. A house on a pad can be tunneled under. Except when the female skunk has young in the den, the den is communal property and will be used again if there are other skunks in the area. Skunks travel extensively within their home range - sometimes one to two miles per night, crossing and recrossing the area as they search for food.

**Diet** Skunks are the gardener's and farmer's best friend. Their diet is almost entirely beneficial to man and his interests. All skunks are omnivorous, but most of their diet consists of animal matter such as grasshoppers, crickets, mice, voles and shrews, insect larvae, turtle eggs, worms, beetles, grubs, caterpillars, slugs, weevils, spiders, millipedes, baby rats, and mice. They also will eat fruit, tender buds from trees, grasses, and berries.

The skunk's greatest enemies are humans and dogs. Some dogs will kill skunks even after sprayed with musk. The great horned owl is also a predator of the skunk, and at times fox, bobcat, and the eagle may attack and kill skunks.

**Lifecycle** In February, breeding season begins, and lasts until the end of March. Males may stay with the female, but usually leave by April. In late April or early May, 61-69 days after mating, females deliver up to ten mouse-sized kits, but litters are usually five or six. Infants are born blind, deaf, and nearly naked, but the black and white color pattern shows. They weigh about one ounce. At 7 days

of age, the infant skunks have doubled their weight to 2 ounces. At 2 weeks, infants are fully furred, and weigh about 4 1/2 ounces. At 17 to 21 days, the eyes and ears will open; at the age of one month, kits weigh about 12 ounces and start walking. They are already able to stamp their feet and scold if angered - they may even try to assume the stance for spraying. Musk glands are about the size of peas.

In late June or July, kits are about 7 weeks old and are about 1 1/2 pounds. They will begin making excursions outside of the den with their mother. When 2 months old, infants will begin travelling with their mother, and are fully weaned. By October, youngsters can be mistaken for adults, except for their smaller size. This is the time that skunks will prepare winter dens. Youngsters will share a den with their mother during the winter months. In warmer climates, skunks will stay active most of the winter. In colder areas, they will sleep through the coldest periods, but do not hibernate. Often skunks will use the same winter den used the previous year.

**Rehabilitation.** There was a time not long ago, when calls about skunks to rehabilitators were rare, but lately a week seldom goes by when several calls about perceived skunk problems aren't received. I believe the reason for the apparent increase in skunks is due to the unusually mild winter, the continuing destruction of wild habitats, and an increase in various garden pests. Some of the complaints are about skunks digging up yards. Attracted to areas infested with caterpillars, gophers, slugs, snails, moles, voles, and mice, the Gardener's Best Friend will most likely make visits to such yards. Skunks are going after slugs and grubs in the surface layer of the soil. This activity will subside as the soil dries out. Do not overwater your lawn, or the problem will persist.

Many of the skunk-related calls are about evicting a skunk from denning sites, such as under elevated sheds, openings under concrete slabs, driveways, porches, and crawl spaces under houses. Before sealing a den, it is important to determine whether or not the den is occupied. This can be accomplished by covering the

entrance with loose dirt. If a skunk is present, it will dig its way out that night and reopen the hole. If the dirt remains undisturbed for two to three nights (and it is not winter), it may be assumed that the den is unoccupied, and it may be permanently closed with masonry, boards, or hardware cloth. If it is an active den, the skunk can be evicted by installing a one-way door over the entrance, that will allow the skunk to leave, but prevents it from reentering. Leave the door in place for several nights, and make sure no new holes appear nearby. Remove the door and close the area as mentioned above. DO NOT evict skunks during spring and early summer, as kits may be in the den, and will perish without their mother.

I do not know why this happens so often, but "Skunks in the Garage" calls are very common. Advise: leave the garage door open at night, and make a path of cheese leading out an open garage door. Spread a 2-foot band of white flour after the garage door, so you can see the skunk's exiting footprints. Keep the door closed in the future. I actually had a woman caller beg me hysterically to come and remove the skunk. She refused to enter her house, and spent the night with a neighbor. Only after I inspected the garage the following morning, and assured her that the skunk was gone, did she reluctantly return home.

Another typical skunk call is "Skunks Stuck in Window Well". Skunks commonly fall into window wells and can't get out because they are poor climbers. Slowly lower a kitchen garbage can or cardboard box on its side into the well, with a chunk of smelly cheese in the back. Move slowly and talk to the skunk -- he won't spray as long as you don't come at him fast or touch him. Wait until he goes into the can or box, then raise it slowly like an elevator, and put it on the ground so he can amble out (after he finishes the cheese).

Callers also ask for advice when a pet has been "skunked". There is little agreement on how to remove skunk odor. The most widely used remedy is tomato juice, which some people claim works. Bathing an animal in tomato juice may seem to remove skunk odor, but in reality does

not, says Dr. William F. Wood, a professor of chemistry at Humboldt State University in Arcata, California. For a pet that has been sprayed, Dr. Wood suggests a mixture containing 1 quart of 3 percent hydrogen peroxide, 1/4 cup of baking soda and 1 teaspoon of liquid detergent. This could, however, bleach a pet's fur, he warns. Other skunk experts say a vinegar and water solution works best, while several other experts recommend Scope mouthwash, a solution of baking soda, and "Skunk-Off" (which is available in pet and feed stores). If you have skunks in your garden, don't evict them, as they will eat every insect "pest" that you don't want eating your garden. Be glad the skunks are there - they are truly the Gardener's Best Friend.

*Some of the information in this article is from the following: Stinky Business, How to Rehabilitate Skunks by Share Bond; Furbearing Animals of North America by Leonard Lee Rue III; Pocket Guide to the Humane Control of Wildlife in Cities and Towns, Humane Society of the United States.*

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