

Striped Skunk

Mephitis mephitis



Identification:

With thick black and white stripes on its back the striped skunk is the largest and most common of the five species of skunks. They have excellent senses of smell and hearing, but relatively weak eyesight.

Being unable to see well makes them extra cautious. They weigh between 3 and 12 pounds, and are comparable to a housecat in size. Long front claws are used for digging.

Natural history:

Striped skunks are found throughout Canada, in every state but HI and AK, and into northern Mexico. They prefer open areas with a mixture of habitats such as woods, grasslands, and agricultural clearings. They stay close to sources of water. Skunks adapt well to urban and suburban areas due to the large amount of cover and food available in them.

Diet: True omnivores, skunks eat a little of everything! Insects, fruit, grasses,

vegetables, garbage, small birds and mammals, eggs, crustaceans, leaves, nuts, cat and dog food and even carrion. Diet changes with season and availability. Adaptability in diet is a common characteristic of urban wildlife.

Breeding:



Breeding occurs from February and March, and while they usually only breed once a year, a second litter may occur if something happens to the first. Gestation lasts a little over two months, with 1 to 10 blind and helpless offspring born. The skunk kittens will stay inside the den for about a month and a half, and then begin to venture outside following their mother. They can breed at approximately 10 months, and will leave the mother by one year. Up to 90% of skunks don't survive their first year, and expected

lifespan is from 1 to 3 years in the wild.

Behavior in an urban environment:

Typically shy and gentle, skunks are rarely seen during the day. They forage in the early mornings and evenings (crepuscular), and may cover large territories looking for food. They will identify regular sources of food, such as dog or cat food outside, open compost piles and are attracted to mounds of soil, rotted wood or anyplace that may harbor insects. They are not aggressive, and will often be spotted sharing a bowl with an outdoor pet. Spraying is a last resort for skunks, who have little other protections. Skunks are slow, cannot climb or outrun other animals, and will try and conserve their spray for threatening situations. Striped skunks will elaborately warn off potential danger, by hissing and growling, stamping their feet, spinning circles and even performing hand stands. Most animals and people quickly understand the warning and stay away. Dogs are the animals most commonly sprayed, since they continue to investigate after warnings. Spray is accurate up to 15 feet away, is oily and difficult to remove, and may briefly blind if it gets in the eyes. Skunk kittens can spray soon after birth, although they cannot aim until almost a month old. Even with few defenses, their scent is enough to keep most mammalian predators away, and in the city their most common danger comes from dogs and cars. They will often avoid yards with aggressive pets. Large raptors, such as great horned owls and red tail hawks, actually will prey on skunks, since they have no little sense of smell. Signs of digging are evident when skunks are around, and although they cannot climb fences, they will dig underneath if there are attractants in a yard. Skunks

are typically solitary, when without young, and territorial and will avoid overlapping areas with unrelated skunks.

Benefits:

Skunks are efficient predators of insects and rodents, and benefit homeowners and gardeners at keeping down household pests. They will eat venomous spiders, bees, wasps, larvae and a large variety of insects considered harmful or a nuisance to humans. As carrion eaters they will help keep neighborhoods and roadways clean and reduce spread of potential disease.



gardeners
beetles,
As carrion

Concerns:

While rarely occurring in Colorado, skunks can be carriers of rabies, a potentially contagious and fatal disease. While rabies typically kills a susceptible animal within 4 -10 days, skunks can carry it for longer, increasing the likelihood of infecting others. Rabies, and other disease that can be transmitted to pets, can be spread by bites from skunks. Do not allow pets to interact with wild animals and keep them up on vaccinations. Rabies can cause a skunk to act in unusual ways. If a skunk is out in the daytime, acting aggressive or lethargic, avoid contact with the animal and call Animal Care and Control at 311. If bitten by a skunk, seek medical treatment, even for superficial wounds. Prompt treatment is 100% effective at protecting people from rabies. There has not been a case of skunk rabies in front range cities, but there were 11 cases in eastern Colorado counties in 2008.

How to move skunks out of your yard:

May through August there may be helpless offspring in dens. Skunks typically will leave once the young are old enough. While in your yard, as long as pets and people are not aggressive towards them, you should have little problems with spraying. Waiting until mid August to encourage them to leave is the most humane option.

1. To determine if a skunk is present in a cavity on your property, loosely cover a potential entrance with soil-don't compact it. A skunk will dig out during the night. If soil undisturbed for three days, securely block entrance to reduce future use.
2. If determined a skunk is residing there, after it has left a den site in the evening, place moth balls or ammonia soaked rags in the entrance. Repeat #1 the following day.
3. In early spring or late fall you can install a one way door. Do not use when babies may be present. Mother will try to regain entrance and babies will not survive, leaving you with potential damage to area and odor issues.
4. After skunk has gone out, prevent access to denning sites. Seal up crawl spaces. Skunks can dig, so extend your screening, fencing or lattice work 8- 10 inches underground.
5. Leave on lights or focus a light on the denning spot.
6. Play a radio by the entrance to encourage them to leave.

Make your yard unattractive to skunks and remove food sources.

1. Do not leave pet food outdoors at night.
2. Secure garbage can lids tightly using bungee cords. Keep garbage cans in the garage until trash day or sprinkle ammonia or cayenne pepper on top of the trash to discourage scavenging.
3. Debris and brush piles should be removed or stacked neatly to eliminate suitable cavities.
4. Great-horned owls are the skunks' main predator. Blow-up or plastic great-horned owls may be strategically placed and periodically moved to deter the skunks.
5. Keep pet doors closed at night to prevent "illegal entry" by a skunk.
6. Keep fruit trees picked and don't leave rotted fruit on the ground.
7. Clean underneath bird feeders. Skunk are attracted to seed as well as the rodents and birds also attracted to the feeders.

What to do if you or pet gets sprayed:

1. Wash cloths, pet or self as soon as possible, the longer the oils remain the harder it is to remove smell. Some clothes may not be recoverable.
2. Commercial products for skunk smell removal: simple green (organic and safe), or skunk off.
3. For walls, patios wash with bleach. DO NOT USE bleach on pets or people.
4. For cleaning pets:

Ingredients

One pint of hydrogen peroxide (be aware this may bleach fur and clothing)

One-half a cup of baking soda

Two tablespoons of dish soap

A bottle of vinegar

Directions

1. Mix the hydrogen peroxide, baking soda and dish soap in a large bowl and stir until the baking soda is completely dissolved.
2. Next, use a spray bottle or sponge to generously apply the mixture onto the pet's fur. Work the mixture through the fur and onto the skin below, massaging the solution into the affected area for ten minutes. Be cautious when applying this solution to the face, as the mixture should not come in contact with the eyes.
3. After ten minutes has passed, thoroughly rinse the solution from the animal's fur and skin. Once the solution is completely rinsed away (there should be no soap bubbles remaining in the water as it flows off the body), towel the pet's fur.
4. If the odor is still relatively strong and skunky, repeat the above-mentioned steps. If the odor is largely eliminated, then continue on to the next step.
5. Once the solution of hydrogen peroxide, dish soap and baking soda has been rinsed away, use a sponge or spray bottle to apply generous amounts of vinegar to the pet's damp fur and skin. Again, saturate the fur and massage the solution into the fur and skin.
6. After letting the solution sit for twenty minutes, thoroughly rinse the pet with fresh water.
7. Often, the pet is left smelling vaguely of vinegar. To leave your pet smelling fresh and clean, follow with a gentle pet shampoo and conditioner.

It can take up to 10 days for a skunk to replenish the oils in its spray glands, they won't spray if you and your pet don't get too close!

Why don't we remove the skunks from our neighborhoods?

Skunks overall are beneficial in controlling pest species and typically pose little threat towards people or pets.

Relocation:

1. Skunks will try to return to their original territory.
2. Left in an unfamiliar location with out knowing where to find food, water or shelter usually leads to death of the animal and typically is not a humane option.
3. Colorado Division of Wildlife does not allow for the relocation of skunks.

Lethal removal:

1. If all attractants and access still there, skunks are territorial and new animals will quickly move back into territory to use the available resources.

Resources

Animal Diversity Web, http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/information/Mephitis_mephitis.html

Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Striped_Skunk

Project Wildlife, <http://www.projectwildlife.org/living-skunks.htm>

Wildlife Rehabilitation Center, the Fund for Animals, <http://www.fundwildlife.org/coexist/skunks.html>

How to get rid of things, <http://www.getridofthings.com/get-rid-of-skunk-smell.htm>

Suite 101.com, http://petcare.suite101.com/article.cfm/how_to_remove_skunk_odor_from_your_pets_fur



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