

# STRIPED SKUNK



The striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) belongs to the mustelid family, which includes weasels, ferrets, martens, fishers, mink, otters, and badgers. Three other skunk species live in the United States: hooded and hognose skunks, which inhabit the Southwest; and the spotted skunk, found over much of the country but in the East north only to the Maryland-Pennsylvania border.

The species commonly found in Pennsylvania is the striped skunk. Widespread, it occurs in all 48 contiguous states, southern Canada, and northern Mexico, from sea level to timberline in suitable habitat. The word "skunk" comes from the Algonquin Indian name for the animal, *seganku*. Other names include polecat, woods pussy, and the French Canadian *enfant du diable*, or "child of the devil."

## Biology

Adult skunks are about two feet long, including a 7-10 inch tail. They weigh 3-12 pounds, depending on age, sex, physical condition, and time of year. Males average 15 percent larger and heavier than females.

by Chuck Fergus

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Skunks have small heads, with small eyes and ears and a pointed nose; short legs; and wide rear ends. The bottoms of their feet are hairless, like those of bears or raccoons. And, like these two other mammals, skunks walk in a plantigrade manner—on the soles of their feet with heels touching the ground. The claws of a skunk's forefeet are long and sharp, well-adapted to digging.

A skunk is colored black and white. Its body is mostly black, with white occurring in a narrow blaze up the middle of its forehead; a broad patch on the back of its head; and a V-shaped mark over its shoulders, which forms stripes that continue along the animal's back, often uniting at the base of its tail. Stripes vary in length and width among individuals. The tail is bushy and black, usually tipped white. Sexes are colored and marked alike.

A skunk's pelt is composed of soft, wavy underfur overlain with long, coarse guard hairs. Skunks molt yearly, beginning in April and ending some time in September.

Skunks make a variety of sounds, including hisses, growls, squeals, soft cooings, and churrings.

By nature, skunks are placid and sluggish. They move at a deliberate walk, slow trot, or clumsy gallop; their top speed is about 10 m.p.h. They can swim, but are poor climbers. Their senses of sight, smell, and hearing have been judged poor to fair compared with those of other wild mammals; their sense of touch, however, is acute.

Skunks are armed with a potent defensive weapon: a pair of well-developed scent glands that lie beneath the skin on either side of the rectum. These glands have nozzle-like ducts, which protrude through the anus. Skunks discharge their scent, or musk, through these nozzles, powering the stream with a strong hip muscle contraction.

Musk is an oily liquid, creamy or yellowish in color. Its active ingredient is the sulphide *mercaptan*. Field guides refer to the musk as "highly repellent to all mammals"; in short, it stinks. Musk can make a predator sick or, if the skunk has been able to direct the substance into the animal's eyes, temporarily blind.

A skunk can shoot musk about twelve feet, but will use it only as a last resort, preferring to bluff an enemy instead. If threatened, a skunk drums its forefeet on the ground, snarls, arches its back, and raises its tail. It can spray in any direction by twisting its rump toward the target--and can even discharge when hoisted by the tail.

Striped skunks are omnivorous. What they eat depends on where they live and what's available. In summer, they feed heavily on insects--adult and larval forms--including grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, and wasps. (Pest insects eaten: potato bugs, tobacco worms, Japanese beetles.)

Skunks dig out bumblebee nests and scratch at the entrances of beehives, catching and eating any honeybees that

fly out. Frequently they leave evidence of their feeding: small, cone-shaped holes in the soil, pine needles, leaf duff or suburban lawns mark where they've dug for grubs. Other summer foods: spiders, toads, frogs, lizards, snakes, mice, chipmunks, and the eggs of turtles and ground-nesting birds.

In fall and winter, skunks eat fruit (wild grapes, Virginia creeper, cherries, nightshade); small mammals (moles, mice, voles, shrews); plant items such as grasses, leaves, buds, and nuts; and carrion. Chiefly nocturnal, they hunt from dusk until dawn.

They den in ground burrows, beneath buildings, stumps, wood and rock piles, and overhanging creek banks. Often a skunk will use an abandoned woodchuck burrow, although if none is available it will dig its own. The burrow has a central chamber (12-15 inches in diameter) about three feet underground, connected to the surface by one or more tunnels 5-15 feet long. The central chamber is lined with dry grass and leaves. Skunks seem to prefer slopes for den sites, probably because these areas drain well. In spring, summer, and early fall, a skunk may den in several different burrows; in winter, it tends to use just one.

Normally solitary, males and females get together for breeding in February and March. Males fight with each other, although they rarely discharge musk during these conflicts. They travel widely in search of mates and breed with several females if possible.

A mated female drives off males shortly after her three-day oestrus period ends. After 60 days' gestation, she bears 2-10 young (usually 5-7). Skunks are capable of breeding in their second year. Younger females may bear fewer young and give birth later in the year than older females.

At birth, striped skunks weigh less than an ounce. Although they're blind and unfurred, the pattern of their future black-and-white pelage shows on their pinkish, wrinkled skin. They develop quickly. After three weeks, their scent glands become functional; at four weeks, their eyes open; and at about two months the young are weaned and ready to leave the den for nighttime hunting forays.



By November, young of the year are as large as adults. While family ties are usually broken in August or September, some mothers over-winter with their offspring. Community dens have been found containing 12 or more skunks, mostly females and young.



Skunks do not hibernate, although they may remain dormant underground all winter. Their body temperature remains near normal. Several skunks may share the same winter den. Females usually lose 10-30 percent of their body weight by spring; males lose only about 10 percent, as they are more inclined to leave their dens and feed during mild spells, mostly at night but occasionally during the day.

The great horned owl, which lacks a well-developed sense of smell and apparently is not bothered by the skunk's musk, is a predator. Dogs, foxes, and bobcats take an occasional skunk (as do cougars, lynxes, badgers, and coyotes in other parts of the species' range), but the skunk's potent musk warns off most predators.

Other mortality factors are disease (pneumonia, distemper, pulmonary aspergillosis, tularemia, brucellosis, and rabies); accidents, including highway kills; starvation; and trapping. Skunks are host to fleas, lice, mites, ticks, and various internal parasites. Most skunks live two to three years in the wild; in captivity, they have lived 10 years.

Skunks are a major wildlife reservoir of rabies, a viral infection that attacks the nervous system of warm-blooded animals and almost always proves fatal in most species. We have a lot to learn about this disease, which periodically arises in wild animal populations.

## Population

Striped skunks live throughout Pennsylvania. Highest numbers are found in farming areas; lowest populations occur

in densely forested mountain regions. Wildlife researchers have estimated an average of one skunk per 10 acres of prime habitat and 13.5 skunks per square mile of agricultural land.

*Mephitis mephitis* has proven highly adaptable. Along with the woodchuck, raccoon, Canada goose, mourning dove, several species of blackbirds, and other wildlife, the skunk prospers wherever humans clear land for farming and remove or drive out larger predators.

Skunks can live in an area for years and, because of their nocturnal habits, remain unseen—although perhaps not “unsmelled”—by most people. Some farmers welcome their presence, realizing that these small predators eat many pest insects and rodents.

Skunks are susceptible to distemper, rabies, and other diseases when they overpopulate a given area. Active trapping may help keep a local population low enough that disease problems won't crop up, although this hasn't been firmly documented. Local populations are also affected by severe weather, food scarcities, and habitat change.

## Habitat

Skunks live in a variety of habitats. They favor mixed woods and brushland, rolling weedy fields, fencerows, wooded ravines, and rocky outcrops in or near agricultural areas. They usually locate within two or three miles of water. For day retreats (resting cover), they use hayfields, pastures, fencerows, and brushy borders of waterways. Cornfields are good feeding areas, where skunks forage for grasshoppers, grubs, and beetles; high corn plants also protect young skunks from airborne and land predators without impeding their movements.

Although they may cover several miles each night while hunting, established individuals rarely wander more than a half-mile from their home burrows. In general, adults range more widely than juveniles, males more widely than females.

In a radio-tracking study conducted in Illinois farmlands, a wildlife biologist estimated the following individual home ranges from a sample of 26 skunks: juvenile females, 579 acres; juvenile males, 701 acres; adult females, 934 acres; and adult males, 1264 acres. (In other words, one to two square miles, with juveniles and females showing less tendency to wander.) The ranges were thought to overlap.

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