



Striped Skunk

When people think of skunks, often the first thing that comes to mind is the musky odor they produce. Many dog owners have faced the unpleasant task of having to bathe their dog after an encounter with a skunk. For these and other reasons skunks can be considered pests, but they typically do not go out of their way to start trouble with dogs and can be important in controlling a variety of insect pests. Problems with skunks, as with many common wildlife species, are often related to food and shelter, and addressing these issues is usually the best way to alleviate problems.

LIFE HISTORY

Range and Habitat: Striped skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*) are found throughout Rhode Island, with the exception of Block Island and the smaller islands of Narragansett Bay. They inhabit a wide variety of habitat types, but are found most commonly in agricultural areas, abandoned croplands, and suburban areas. Skunk populations may be higher in urban, and suburban areas than in rural areas due to an abundance of food and potential den sites.

Behavior: Skunks generally are a nocturnal species, however, it is not unusual to see skunks foraging in daylight hours, particularly at dawn or dusk. Skunks do not hibernate, but they will remain inactive for short periods in extremely cold weather. For shelter, they will widen burrows left behind by woodchucks or other fossorial (burrowing) animals, or create their own quarters when a sufficient burrow is unavailable. These burrows are often located in rock piles, wood piles, beneath sheds, under low porches or in holes in foundations. Suburban and urban areas are good skunk habitat because there are many denning and feeding opportunities available.

Food Habits: Skunks are omnivorous, and eat a wide variety of things such as fruits, berries, grass, buds, nuts, small mammals, snakes, toads, grasshoppers, crickets, potato bugs, tobacco worms, wasps and bees. They will also eat pet food, livestock feed, eggs, and poultry if they are able to access the coop.

Reproduction: Breeding usually takes place in late February or March. Male skunks will mate with as many females as possible and often fight with other males for access to receptive females. This often leads to spraying. Male skunks do not participate in raising the young. After a gestation period of 60 to 75 days, females give birth to 4 to 8 young per litter in May or early June. Female skunks may give birth to a second litter later in the summer. The kits are born blind and hairless. By eight days, young skunks are capable of spraying. After eight weeks in the den, relying on their mother to nurse them, the kits will leave the den and begin foraging with their mothers. It is not unusual to see a mother skunk being closely followed, often in a single line, by her offspring.

DID YOU KNOW...

- Skunks are a member of the Mephitidae family. “Mephitis” means “bad odor.”
- During the winter, skunks will lose about 50% of their body weight.
- Skunks can spray their musk up to 15 feet.
- Striped skunks are one of four species of skunks that inhabit the U.S, and the only species that occurs in RI.
- Skunks will share their burrows with other animals, such as woodchucks or opossums.
- Skunks are very tolerant of stings from bees, one of their favorite snacks.
- Skunks have an excellent sense of smell, allowing them to locate grubs beneath the ground.
- Skunks can weigh between 2 and 12 lbs; females are typically 15% smaller than males.

LIVING WITH SKUNKS

Skunks will burrow to create dens under porches, decks, or buildings, especially sheds elevated on cement blocks. Skunks will also dig conical holes in lawns in search of insects. By applying the methods listed below, most issues can be easily resolved. Skunks are not aggressive and are important in controlling garden pests. Trapping and lethally removing skunks and other wildlife simply creates a space for a new animal to move in. The best way to prevent problems with wildlife is to eliminate the sources of food and shelter which draw wildlife into yards.

The DEM does not recommend that property owners attempt to live trap nuisance furbearers unless they are prepared and willing to euthanize the offending animal. State regulations prohibit the live capture and translocation of furbearers. Captured furbearers can only legally be released on the property on which they were captured.

Disease: Skunks can be affected by [rabies](#) like any other species of mammal. It is advised to not approach, handle, or touch wild mammals to reduce potential exposure to rabies.

TIPS FOR PREVENTING PROBLEMS WITH SKUNKS

Remove any outdoor food sources such as:

- **Trash bins or dumpsters:** Trash should be secured in containers and only put out on the curb the morning of trash collection.
- **Compost:** Do not place meat scraps or fatty items in compost piles, keep compost covered.
- **Pet food dishes:** Avoid feeding pets outside or bring in dishes at night.
- **Livestock:** Secure livestock in pens or buildings.
- **Eliminate sources of shelter:** Build sheds on concrete pad or foundation if possible. Bury galvanized wire fencing 6-10 in around raised structures in a “L” shape facing outward.

Never intentionally feed wildlife.

It is illegal in Rhode Island, and will create problems for humans and wildlife alike.

[Click here](#) to find a Licensed Nuisance Wildlife Control Specialist near you.

For additional resources visit:
www.wildlifehelp.org

WHAT'S ALL THE STINK ABOUT?

The musk that skunks spray is produced from a pair of glands near the anus. It is made up of a compound called butylmercaptan and the smell is derived from a sulfur compound.

Musk can cause symptoms such as nausea, teary eyes, burning in the nose, and in extreme cases, temporary blindness when sprayed directly into the eyes. When skunks feel threatened, they will stomp their front feet, snarl, raise their tail, and arch their back as a warning. Only after all this showmanship will a skunk spray.



REGULATORY STATUS

In Rhode Island, state law (*RIGL 20-16-2*) allows a property owner to kill, by legal means, any furbearer (as defined in *RIGL 20-16-1*) that is killing or attempting to kill any livestock or domestic animals, destroying crops, creating a health hazard, or causing economic damage to their property. However, the law does not allow for the random taking of wildlife, for the taking of furbearers for their pelts outside the open season, or for killing of animals outside the boundaries of the property of the person with the problem. Also, it does not allow for unlawful methods of take such as poisons, snares, foothold traps, or discharge of firearms in violation of state or local ordinances. The law states that animals taken must be reported to the DEM within 24 hours. For more information, visit dem.ri.gov/huntfish.