



# Striped Skunks

(*Mephitis mephitis*)



When people think of skunks, often the first thing that comes to mind is the musky odor associated with this species. Many dog owners have faced the unpleasant task of having to bathe their dog after an encounter with a skunk. And who has not had the experience of that cloying smell permeating the house on a warm, humid summer evening. For these and other reasons skunks can be considered pests but they typically do not go out of their way to start trouble with the dog 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.



## Description

The striped skunk is probably the most familiar species of suburban wildlife. It is a member of the Mephitidae family, which includes all of the North American skunk species; “mephitis” means “bad odor”. The striped skunk, as its name suggests, is characterized by the white stripes on its back, which serve as a warning to predators. It has a long bushy tail, a small head and eyes, small, rounded ears, and a pointed nose. The bottoms of its feet are hairless and well adapted for digging, with the front feet having five long, curved claws. Adult skunks can range from 3 to 12 pounds, depending on age, sex, and feeding habits. Males usually average roughly 15% larger than females.



Skunks are well known for their musk and ability to propel it at a distance. Spraying is a defense mechanism used by skunks to defend themselves against would-be predators. The musk they spray is a compound known as butylmercaptan; an oily liquid that is creamy and yellowish. Its 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. Skunks can spray musk as far as 12 to 15 feet, but they only spray as a last resort. 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. When it finally does spray, it will turn its behind toward the target and emit the musk from a pair of glands near the anus. These glands are nozzle-like in structure and are powered by a set of strong hip muscles. Contrary to popular belief, a skunk **can** spray musk even when its hind legs are off the ground, or when hoisted by the tail. It is important to remember that musk causes no permanent ill effects.

## **Life History**

### **Range and Habitat:**

Of the four skunk species in North America, the striped skunk is the most widely distributed, and also the only species found in Rhode Island. They are found throughout the state, with the exception of Block Island and smaller islands of Narragansett Bay. They can also be found in all of the lower 48 states, northern Mexico, and southern Canada. They range from sea level, all the way to the tree line in mountainous regions, as long as suitable habitat is present. Striped skunks 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, which means they are most active at night. However, it is not unusual to see skunks foraging at dawn or dusk, or even in daylight hours. Although skunks are not true hibernators, they will go into periods of inactivity in extremely cold weather. For shelter, they prefer burrows that are often made from the abandoned homes of other animals. Skunks will widen burrows left behind by woodchucks or other fossorial (burrowing) animals, but they will also 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. They prefer to locate their burrows under sloped ground to allow for better drainage during wet periods. Skunks may even share their burrows with other animals, such as woodchucks or opossums. Suburban and urban areas are good skunk habitat because there are many denning and feeding opportunities available.

**Food Habits:** Skunks are omnivorous, which means they eat both plant and animal material. Plant material can include fruits, such as apples, pears, blueberries, raspberries, and mulberries. During spring and summer they eat more animal material because small mammals and insects are more abundant.



Skunks will eat grasshoppers, crickets, potato bugs, tobacco worms, wasps and bees. With an excellent sense of smell, they are able to locate and dig up grubs and ground nesting bees. Surprisingly, they are able to tolerate bee stings quite well. They will also consume mice, toads, frogs, and snakes when available. In colder weather periods, they will eat grass, buds, and nuts. Skunks 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.

## *Skunks as Disease Carriers*

**Rabies** is a viral disease of mammals. It is transmitted from the saliva of the infected animal by bites or scratches. First confirmed in Rhode Island in 1994, the rabies virus is now endemic and can be expected to occur in wild mammal populations throughout the state. Infected animals can exhibit a wide range of symptoms, from aggressiveness and rage, to aimless wandering, lethargy, weakness of the hind legs, and loss of awareness. Never attempt to capture or handle a skunk or other wild mammal whether it looks sick, injured or healthy. Any contact between a skunk or other wild mammal and a person should be reported to a physician immediately. Any contact between a domestic animal and wild mammal should be reported to your veterinarian and local animal control officer.

For more information regarding rabies, or other diseases carried by wildlife, visit the CDC website at: <http://www.cdc.gov/rabies/>. To report a rabies exposure, contact the RI Department of Health Rabies Hotline at (401) 222-2577.

## *Odor Removal*

Musk can be removed from clothing with mixtures of diluted vinegar or tomato juice. These mixtures can also be used to remove odors from **pets**. Below is a recipe that can be used to remove the musk smell from pets and a list of directions.

Skunk Odor Removal Recipe:

- 1 quart of 3% hydrogen peroxide
- ¼ cup of baking soda
- 1 teaspoon of liquid soap or detergent

Directions for application:

- Use the formula immediately; do not store in sealed container
- Wear rubber gloves when applying the mixture
- Mix the ingredients together and bathe the animal, and then rinse the animal thoroughly
- Shampoo animal and rinse again



Remember to always be cautious in using these mixtures because they can permanently stain clothing and other surfaces. Clothing can be soaked in a weak solution of chlorine bleach, but again, be aware that bleach can discolor clothing. For pets, effective shampoos and odor removers can be purchased at many veterinary offices and pet stores. Do not use bleach on your pets. If musk is sprayed directly into the eyes, rinse thoroughly with water until the symptoms are alleviated. It may be extremely painful but will not cause permanent blindness.

## *Common Types of Damage*

A major problem with skunks is their digging. They can burrow to create dens under porches, decks, or buildings, especially sheds elevated on cement blocks. Skunks will also dig holes in lawns in search of insects and insect larvae such as Japanese beetle grubs. These holes are usually small and can be identified by a conical shape, and

a 3 to 4 inch diameter. They may also dig up flowers or vegetables where fertilizers such as bonemeal, bloodmeal, or fishmeal have been recently applied. Skunks will eat chicken eggs if they can gain access to the coop.

## **Preventing Problems**

Skunks will often create dens or use dens created by woodchucks under sheds elevated on cement blocks. Keep skunks and other animals from accessing these places by protecting them with galvanized wire fencing. It is important to bury six to ten inches or more below grade to prevent the skunk from burrowing underneath it. The best way to do this is to bend the material in the shape of an “L” and bury it so the bottom of the “L” is facing away from the structure you wish to protect. When building these structures you may want to consider pouring a concrete slab for a foundation.



Since food items will also attract skunks, it is very important not to leave unsecured garbage outdoors. ***Be sure not to leave out pet food.*** Skunks are also attracted to birdseed, so removing bird feeders can help rid your yard of skunks. Do not put meat scraps, egg shells, stale bread, or other enticing items in compost piles.

Skunks will sometimes wander into garages or buildings when doors are left open, often if they smell garbage, pet food, or bird seed. They should be left alone to wander out on their own, although they may not do so until dark. Another common problem is when a skunk falls into an open window well and cannot climb out. A simple plank used as a ramp is often enough for the skunk to get out. If the skunk cannot climb the plank, try attaching small wood strips on it, much like the rungs of a ladder.

## **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.



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. Moving wildlife can spread disease to animals in areas where the nuisance individuals are moved. By moving wildlife, you will only cause harm to the animals, and possibly cause problems for other people who live in the relocation area. Also note that poisons are illegal for use against skunks, or any other animals, and smoking animals from their dens is also illegal.

RIDEM does not remove nuisance wildlife. For the name of a nuisance wildlife control specialist please visit [www.wildlifehelp.org](http://www.wildlifehelp.org) or call the Division of Fish & Wildlife at 401-789-0281. For further information you can email the Division of Fish & Wildlife at [DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov](mailto:DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov).

**For more information regarding trapping regulations, proper licensing procedures, and other questions you may have in dealing with nuisance skunks in your area you can contact The Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife Office, Great Swamp Field Headquarters by emailing [DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov](mailto:DEM.DFW@dem.ri.gov) or by calling (401) 789-0281. To contact the Department of Health Rabies hotline call (401) 222-2577.**

### **Selected References**

U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service [USFWS]. 2015 Jan 09. Striped Skunks. Retrieved from: [https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Cold\\_Springs/Wildlife\\_Habitat/Striped\\_Skunk.html](https://www.fws.gov/refuge/Cold_Springs/Wildlife_Habitat/Striped_Skunk.html)

Striped skunk photographs courtesy of the United States Fish and Wildlife Service.

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