Striped skunk

Environment Canada
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Canadian Wildlife Service
Service canadien de la faune

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The striped skunk *Mephitis mephitis* is one of the most useful small mammals that inhabit the mixed farmlands, grasslands, and forests of Canada. Unlike many other animals it has adapted well to the presence of humans, and its present range, from central Mexico to the Northwest Territories and from the Maritimes to west-central British Columbia, is much expanded since primeval times.

The skunk prefers open areas of mixed forests and grasslands and has very little fear of humans, so it has benefited from the new habitats created by the opening of the forests that accompanied settlement and agriculture.

There are three groups of skunks represented by eight species in North America, but only two species occur in Canada. The hog-nosed skunks *Conepatus* are confined to the southwestern United States, Mexico, and South America; and the hooded skunk *Mephitis macroura* occurs in the southwestern United States and Mexico. Of the four species of spotted skunk *Spilogale*, the eastern spotted skunk *Spilogale putorius* almost reaches the Canadian border between Minnesota and Manitoba, but only the western spotted skunk *Spilogale gracilis* actually occurs in Canada. There are a few records of this skunk in southern British Columbia, but only as far as 120 km north of Vancouver. The striped skunk is the one familiar to most Canadians.

Characteristics

The striped skunk is about the size of a cat, but has a stout body, a rather small head, short legs, and a bushy tail. Its small head fits conveniently, but sometimes too snugly, into enticing open jars.

The thick, glossy fur is black, with a thin white stripe down the centre of the face and a broad white stripe beginning on the back of the head, forking at the shoulders and continuing as a white stripe along each side of the back to the base of the tail. The tail is mostly black, but the stripes may extend down it, usually to a tuft of white at the tip.

The skunk has long, straight claws for digging out the burrows of mice, ripping apart old logs for grubs and larvae, and digging in the sand for turtle eggs. It moves slowly and deliberately and depends for safety not on running away or on remaining inconspicuous, but on its scent glands.

Distribution of the striped skunk

Skunks belong to the weasel family Mustelidae, all of whose members have well-developed scent glands and a musky odour. The skunk is outstanding for this characteristic, however, and can discharge a bad smelling fluid to defend itself. Indeed its scientific name, *mephitis*, is a Latin word meaning "bad odour."

The scent of the skunk is produced by a thick, yellow, oily fluid, or musk, secreted by two glands located on either side of the anus at the base of the tail. The glands are about the size of a grape and contain about a tablespoon of musk, enough for five or six discharges. The glands are connected by ducts to two small nipples that are hidden when the tail is down and exposed when the tail is raised. The musk is produced rather slowly, at a rate of about one-third of an ounce a week, and is discharged only as a last desperate measure after repeated warning signals.

A skunk is not an aggressive animal and will always try to retreat from a human or other large enemy. An angry skunk will growl or hiss, stamp its front feet rapidly, or even walk a short distance on its front feet with its tail high in the air. The striped skunk cannot spray from this position. To perform that defence it usually humps its back and turns in a U-shaped position so that both the head and tail face the enemy. Many people used to the antics of the striped skunk have been deceived on their first encounter with a spotted skunk, which faces an attacker standing on its front feet with its back and tail arched forward.

The skunk directs the fluid from the glands in a stream that disperses into a fine spray. The spray can reach as far as 6 m and can be aimed with considerable accuracy for up to 3 m. The odour is strong enough to be carried almost 1 km on the wind. At close range the spray of a skunk causes severe smarting of the eyes and even nausea, but these symptoms soon disappear as the nasal passages quickly become desensitized to the odour.

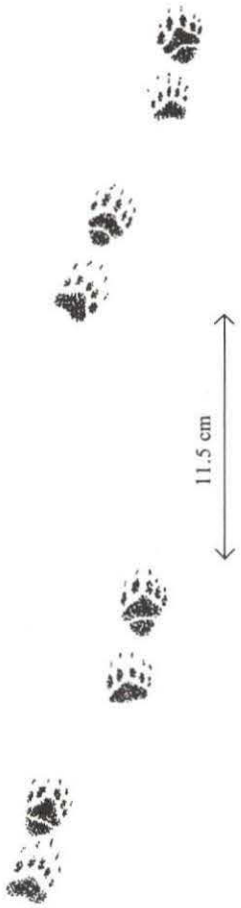
Various remedies are recommended to get rid of the odour on clothing or dogs that have been sprayed by a skunk, but some of the remedies are almost as bad as the musk. Vinegar or a mixture of vinegar and detergent is a simple and quite effective treatment. Veterinarians, who treat large numbers of dogs that have been sprayed by skunks, recommend a bath in tomato juice.

Skunks seem to be aware of the repulsiveness of their own odour and avoid scenting on themselves. They therefore avoid musking in confined spaces, and their dens have little of the skunk odour about them. Skunks may be carried in a burlap bag or a covered live trap, as long as they are not bumped or badly frightened.

Habits

Skunks generally live in the abandoned dens of woodchucks, foxes, or other mammals their size or larger and only occasionally excavate their own dens. They will also use stumps, rock piles, or refuse heaps, or will even set up housekeeping under a house or porch or in a cellar. The latter practice is especially common in farming areas. Skunks that den under buildings should be trapped

Tracks



outside. Never shoot them under the building. To dispose of unwanted or locally harmful skunks without harming them, box traps may be used. Such traps permit easy handling of the skunks and transportation to more suitable localities for release. Once the skunk is captured the trap may be covered with several burlap bags until it is transported several kilometres away and the skunk released. For information on obtaining such a trap, contact the local humane society.

If a skunk digs its own den it is usually simple, but one taken over from another animal may be quite elaborate. There may be from one to five well-hidden openings that lead to a system of tunnels and chambers. One of the chambers is lined with leaves and used for a nest. The leaves may also be used to plug the openings to the den in cold weather. A skunk gathers leaves by placing them under its body and then shuffling along to the den with the leaves held between its legs as it moves.

Skunks may leave their den to forage at any hour of the day, but are usually abroad from late afternoon or evening through the night. They forage within about 800 m of the den, but may venture as far away as 2 km in a night. Males become more active during the breeding season, when they may travel 8 km a night.

Skunks are truly omnivorous. They eat insects, mice, shrews, ground squirrels, young rabbits, birds' eggs, and various plants. During the autumn and winter they eat about equal amounts of plant and animal foods, but eat mainly insects in the summer. Skunks are especially fond of grasshoppers, crickets, and insect larvae such as white grubs, army worms, and cutworms. They will even eat wasps and bees, which they kill with their front feet. Although they annoy farmers by raids on beehives and henhouses, it has been estimated that almost 70 percent of a skunk's diet constitutes a benefit to people and only 5 percent is harmful to human property.

By autumn skunks have acquired a heavy layer of fat, and in November or December they select a deep den in which to spend the winter. As many as 20 skunks have been found in one den, but the number is usually much fewer. Usually the mother and young den together, entering the den when the temperature reaches about 0°C.

Males are active until the temperature reaches about −10°C and may join their own family, other males, or may den alone. They may emerge briefly from their den at any time during winter. Any grouping of sex and age may be found together in a den.

By late February, in some parts of Canada, skunks begin to awaken from their winter state of torpor, and are fully active by the end of March. On the prairies and in the most northern parts of the range, spring emergence is somewhat later.

Breeding

Skunks begin to breed in late February or March, when they emerge from their dens, and the young are usually born in early May. There are usually four to six young in a litter, although the number may vary from two to sixteen.

Newborn skunks weigh about 15 g and, although almost naked at birth, show the characteristic black and white colour pattern of the adult. They are fully haired in about 13 days, and their eyes open after 17 to 21 days.

When the young skunks are approximately seven weeks old the female takes them out to forage for food, and they are weaned at about two months. They remain with their mother until autumn and may join her in the winter den.

Enemies

The scent of the skunk is an effective defence against most natural enemies. Nevertheless, it is preyed upon by bobcats and birds of prey. Most birds, especially hawks and owls, have developed the sense of sight at the expense of their sense of smell; the Great Horned Owl in particular seems relatively unaffected by the scent and has made the skunk its principal prey.

Trappers take 6000 to 7000 skunks a year in Canada, but this represents only a small fraction of the total skunk population and has no appreciable effect on numbers.

Motorists are a much greater hazard. Skunks, like porcupines, are overly confident of their defence mechanisms and often pay heavily for the air of unconcern with which they cross highways.

Skunks as carrier of rabies

Skunks are a major carrier of the virus of rabies, which all warm-blooded animals, including humans, are susceptible to. The occurrence of rabies is a continuing problem in many parts of Canada. Skunks may transmit the disease to other wildlife, livestock, and humans as well as propagating it among their own kind. Although skunks will normally retreat from a person, the rabid animal will often show no fear. Children in particular should be warned against handling "over-friendly" skunks.

If a person is bitten, he or she should cleanse the wound *at once* and report to a physician. Delay could result in fatality. Rabies is a reportable disease and as such must be reported immediately to the nearest veterinary authority, usually the District Veterinary Officer of the Animal Health Divison, Food Production and Inspection Branch, of the federal Department of Agriculture and Agri-Food. The skunk should be killed, if possible, and sent for examination at a federal veterinary laboratory.

Economic importance

Although skunks may become a nuisance to poultrymen and beekeepers, the damage they inflict is not economically important and they are beneficial to agriculture. In fact, skunks proved such an efficient enemy of the hop grub in New York State that legislation was passed to protect the skunk. In many parts of their range they are the most important predator on insect pests.

The skunk is a furbearer of minor importance. Its fur, which is thick and lustrous, can be made into coats and jackets, but is used mainly for trimming. Most of the pelts marketed in Canada come from eastern Canada.

In the period following the First World War, when fur prices were high and unstriped black skunks were in great demand, various attempts were made to raise skunks on fur farms. Had fur prices remained at the level they reached during the boom, these ventures might have succeeded, but today the cost of raising a skunk is far more than the pelt is worth. The value of the skunk lies elsewhere. It is an interesting and attractive animal that plays a significant part in nature, especially as a predator of mice and insects.

Reading list

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The Canadian Wildlife Service

The Canadian Wildlife Service of Environment Canada handles wildlife matters that are the responsibility of the Canadian government. These include protection and management of migratory birds as well as nationally significant wildlife habitat. Other responsibilities are endangered species, control of international trade in endangered species, and research on wildlife issues of national importance. The service cooperates with the provinces, territories, Parks Canada, and other federal agencies in wildlife research and management.

For more information about the Canadian Wildlife Service or its other publications, please write to the following address:

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