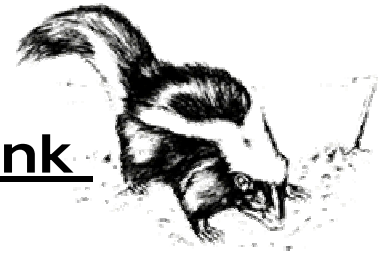




Eastern Striped Skunk

Mephitis mephitis



Commonly referred to as polecats, striped skunks are about the size of domestic house cats. The skunk is a member of the Mustelid family, which includes weasel, mink, marten, fisher and otters. The eastern striped skunk's body is covered with fluffy black fur. It has a narrow white stripe up the middle of the forehead and a broad white area on the top of the head and neck, which usually divides into two stripes continuing along the back. The long, bushy tail is a mixture of white and black hairs. There is considerable variation in striping patterns and coloration. Skunks have a small head, small eyes and a pointed snout. Their short legs and flat-footed gait makes them appear to waddle when they walk. Sharp teeth and long claws enable them to dig in soil or sod and pull apart rotten logs in search of food. They weigh from 6 to 14 pounds, with a length of 21 to 26 inches. Males are somewhat larger than females. Up to 90% of skunks die in their first winter. In the wild skunks may live to be 2 to 3 years old. In captivity they have been known to survive for up to 15 years.

Diet

Striped skunks are true omnivores. A skunk's diet depends on what is available in its foraging territory. They eat many things including insects, small mammals, carrion, birds and their eggs, crustaceans (such as crayfish), fruits, grasses, leaves, buds, grains, and nuts. Insects make up approximately 70% of their diet. Striped skunks often attack the nests of colonial insects, such as bees and ants. When attacking a bee hive, they wait for the angry bees to emerge from the hive, then bat them out of the air and eat them.

Population

Striped skunks are generally abundant in the wild and are not listed as a conservation concern. Their population dipped in the 1930s when skunk pelts were particularly valuable due to an increased fashion trend to wear fur garments and a decreased amount of fur available from other fur-bearing mammals. However, skunk fur value has declined along with the fur industry as a whole.

Range

The eastern striped skunk occurs throughout southern Canada and all of the United States, except for arid areas in the Southwest, and in extreme northern Mexico. The eastern striped skunk is adaptable to a wide range of habitats but prefers areas of open fields with low, brushy vegetation. Fields, fence rows, wooded ravines and rocky outcrops are popular habitats for them, but they may also be found under buildings, in culverts and near garbage dumps.

Behavior

The most di-"stink"-tive behavior of the skunk is its ability to spray. The scent glands that provide this unique method of defense are deeply embedded in muscles located on either side of the rectum. These glands secrete a sticky, yellow fluid, the main component of which is butylmercaptan. The skunk is a good marksman and can spray accurately up to 10 feet or more. Skunks are mild tempered by nature and will not defend themselves by spraying unless they are provoked. Usually, skunks will warn you when they are about to spray. First they face you with their tail in the air, then they stamp their front feet before turning their behind toward you and spraying.

If confronted by a skunk in this position, it is best to make a slow, quiet retreat. A skunk's spray is normally directed toward the eyes and may cause temporary blindness and nausea, rinsing your eyes with water will help restore vision.

Skunks are primarily nocturnal, although they are occasionally active during the day. They usually spend the daylight hours sleeping in their underground burrows. Skunks may dig their own burrows, but they prefer to use natural cavities among rocks, or under stone walls, logs or buildings. They will often use abandoned woodchuck burrows. Most burrows are six to 20 feet long and reach three to four feet underground, with two, three or four chambers. During winter, skunks sometimes den with other skunks.

Striped skunks use scent marking to communicate presence and reproductive state to other skunks. They also communicate visually by raising their fur and changing posture. Skunks have a good sense of hearing, but their vision is poor. While mostly silent, they can make a variety of sounds such as churring, hisses, and screams.

Reproduction

Mating takes place during late winter and early spring. After a gestation period of 62 to 68 days, an average of six blind and helpless young are born in the spring. At three weeks of age, young skunks open their eyes and begin crawling. At seven weeks, they begin to venture out with the female and are able to spray musk; they usually disperse during the fall of their first year. Adult males are generally solitary except during the mating season.

Man and Skunks

The ability of skunks to adapt to various habitats has been advantageous to their population over the years. The skunk's adaptability allows it to live in urban and suburban areas with only remnants of undeveloped land. Skunks are one of the most common sources of wildlife problems reported by homeowners. Skunks will dig up lawns and gardens searching for insect larvae and grubs. They leave cone-shaped, divet-like holes, three to four inches in diameter and may also turn over larger pieces of sod. Controlling lawn grubs may reduce skunk damage to lawns. Skunks will raid garbage cans for a variety of food scraps. Garbage cans should have tight-fitting lids and should be inaccessible to wild animals. Skunks may take up residence under porches or homes, and forage in vegetable gardens. Fencing will help keep skunks out of these areas because they are not good climbers. Skunks are adept at digging, any fencing may have to be buried at least one foot deep.

Did you know?

- All mustelids produce a strong smelling liquid from scent glands. However, the skunk is the only member which can spray its' scent as a defense mechanism.
- *Mephitis mephitis*, the skunk's latin name, translates appropriately into "bad odor".
- The skunk makes enough liquid for five sprays a week.
- Skunks have their scent gland from the day they are born, and can spray small amounts of musk when they are only 8 days old.
- Baby skunks are called "kits".
- Turtle nests are often dug up by skunks and eggs of ground nesting birds will also be eaten if encountered by skunks.
- Only the great horned owl preys regularly on the skunk and it usually has a noticeable odor of skunk about it.