Controlling Skunks In New Mexico

Guide L-204

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IDENTIFICATION

The skunk, a member of the weasel family, is represented in New Mexico primarily by the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) (fig. 1). It is characterized by prominent, longitudinal white stripes that run down the back. The fur is otherwise jet black. The body of the striped skunk is about the size of an ordinary house cat (up to 29 inches long and weighing about 8 pounds) with short, stocky legs and proportionately large feet. The striped skunk is equipped with well-developed claws for digging.

The spotted skunk (*Spilogale gracilis*) also is found in New Mexico. It is smaller (up to 21 inches long and weighing about 2.2 pounds), more weasel-like, and is readily distinguished by white spots and short, broken white stripes in a dense, jet-black coat. Although not commonly seen, hog-nose (*Conepatus mesoleucus*) and hooded (*Mephitis macroura*) skunks also are found in New Mexico.

All skunks have the ability to discharge nauseating musk from the anal glands and are capable of several discharges.

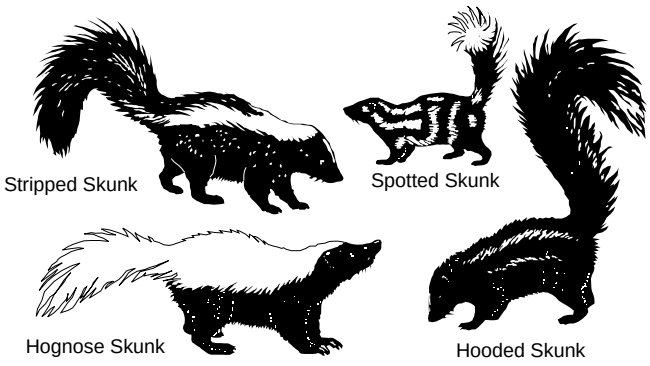

Figure 1. Striped skunk, spotted skunk, hognose skunk, and hooded skunk

HABITAT

Skunks inhabit woodlands, grasslands, and deserts, generally making their home in an underground den, in a hollow log, or under a building. Spotted skunks can climb trees and will use hollow limbs as dens. Skunks are nocturnal, and have great confidence in defending themselves against other animals.

FOOD HABITS

Skunks eat plant and animal foods in about equal amounts in fall and winter. They eat considerably more animal matter during spring and summer when insects, their preferred food, are more available. Grasshoppers, beetles, and crickets are the insects most frequently eaten. White grubs in lawns often are eaten. Field and house mice are regular and important items in the skunk diet, particularly in winter. Rats, cottontails, and other small mammals are taken when other food is scarce.

GENERAL BIOLOGY

The breeding season of skunks begins late in February when 2-year-old females mate. Females born in the preceding year mate about a month later. Gestation usually lasts 7 to 10 weeks.

Older females bear young during the first part of May, while yearling females bear young in early June. There is usually only one litter per year. Litters commonly consist of 4 to 6 young, but may have from 2 to 16. Younger or smaller females have smaller litters than older or larger females. The young stay with the female until fall. Both sexes mature in their first spring.

The home range of the skunk is 0.5 to 2 miles in diameter. During breeding season, a male may travel 4 or 5 miles each night. Skunks can become dormant during the coldest part of the winter. While skunks are generally not sociable, they may den together in winter for warmth.

DAMAGE

Skunks become nuisances when their burrowing and feeding habits conflict with people. They may burrow under porches or buildings by entering openings under the foundation. Skunks occasionally damage beehives by trying to feed on the bees. They dig holes in lawns, golf courses, and gardens to search for insect grubs found beneath the ground surface. Skunks also have been known to kill poultry and eat eggs. Garbage or refuse left outdoors also may be disturbed by skunks. Digging normally appears as small, 3- to 4-inch cone-shaped holes or patches of upturned earth.

On occasion, skunks will feed on corn during the milk stage, generally eating only on the lower ears. This differs from squirrels who also may damage corn, but feed on the upper ears. Raccoons knock down cornstalks, while skunks do not.

Because striped skunks normally don't climb, loss of poultry that are enclosed by fencing may be the work of rats, weasels, minks, or raccoons. However, keep in mind that skunks are excellent diggers, so fencing may not always deter them. Weasels and raccoons usually kill several chickens or ducks. Skunks normally feed on the eggs rather than poultry, but may occasionally kill one or more fowl. Skunks usually feed on the head and neck. Eggs are usually opened on one end with the edges crushed inward. Dog damage can be characterized by large numbers of birds that have been indiscriminately killed and mutilated.

Tracks may be used to identify the animal causing damage. Both the hind and forefeet of skunks have five toes. However, the fifth toe may not be obvious in a light track. Claw marks will be easily visible, and the heels of the forefeet are normally not imprinted. The hind feet tracks are approximately 2.5 inches long (fig. 2).

Skunk droppings usually can be identified by the undigested insect parts they contain. Odor is not always a reliable indicator of the presence or absence of skunks.

Skunks are the primary carriers of rabies in the Midwest.Take care to avoid overly aggressive skunks that approach without hesitation. Any skunk showing abnormal behavior, such as daytime activity and a lack of wariness, should be treated with caution. A skunk that refuses to spray when harassed is a good suspect for rabies.

Figure 2. Skunk tracks.

DAMAGE PREVENTION AND CONTROL METHODS

Exclusion

Preventive measures can be taken to keep skunks from denning under buildings by sealing all openings under the foundation. Cover all openings with wire mesh, sheet metal, or concrete. Where access can be gained by digging, obstructions such as fencing should be buried 1.5 to 2 feet deep.

Outbuildings like lawn sheds or chicken coops can be protected by sealing all ground-level openings into the building and closing the doors at night. Poultry yards and coops without subsurface foundations may be fenced with 3-foot wire mesh fencing. The lowest foot of fencing should be buried, with the bottom 6 inches bent outward from the yard or building. Skunks trying to dig below the fence should be discouraged by this horizontal barrier. Skunks can be excluded from window wells or similar pits with mesh fencing.

Beehive damage can be prevented by placing hives on stands 3 feet high. If skunks try to climb the supports, it may be necessary to place aluminum guards around the bases of hives to act as deflections. However, striped skunks will not normally climb. Garbage can disturbances can be eliminated with tight-fitting lids.

Habitat Modification

Garbage or other food sources will attract skunks. Sanitary precautions should be taken to reduce this problem. Rodents living in barns, crawl spaces, sheds, and garages provide a source of food that can create a continual skunk problem. Controlling rodents may be necessary to eliminate this attraction.

Debris such as piles of lumber, fence posts, and junk cars provide shelter for skunks and may encourage them to use an area. Clean-up of the area may be the most important step in discouraging skunks.

Repellents
There are no registered repellents for skunks. It should be emphasized that repellents, when legal, are only a temporary measure at best, and other methods must be used to permanently solve the problem.

Toxicants
No toxicants are registered for use in controlling skunks.

Traps
Skunks can be caught in box traps set near the entrance of their den. When a den is used by more than one animal, set several traps to reduce capture time. Box traps can be bought or they can be built.

Skunks are often taken in traps using canned, fish-flavored cat food as bait. Other food baits such as peanut butter, sardines, and chicken entrails also are effective. To reduce non-target catches, especially free-roaming house cats, use a broken, raw egg.

Before setting live traps, cover them with canvas or a similar material to reduce the chances of a trapped skunk discharging its scent. The canvas creates a dark, secure environment for the animal. Always approach a trap slowly and quietly to prevent upsetting a trapped skunk. Gently remove the trap from the area and release or kill the trapped skunk. If the skunk is to be released, it should be transported at least 10 miles and released in a habitat far from human dwellings. If the skunk is to be killed, do not shoot the skunk while it is the trap. This will cause the skunk to spray and will also damage your trap. Instead release the skunk from the trap and when it moves a safe distance away, it can then be dispatched.

Leghold traps can be used to catch skunks. However, the inherent odor problems make it unwise to do so.

OTHER METHODS
The following steps are suggested for removing skunks already established under buildings:

1. Seal all possible entrances along the foundation, but leave the main burrow open.

2. Sprinkle a layer of flour 2 feet in circumference on the ground in front of the opening.

3. After dark, examine the flour for tracks that indicate the skunk has left to feed. If tracks are not present, re-examine in an hour.

4. Once tracks in flour indicate the skunk has departed and the den is empty, cover the remaining entrance immediately.

5. Reopen the entrance the next day for 2 hours after dark to allow any remaining skunks to exit the entrance.

6. Repeat this procedure for 2 or 3 days before permanently sealing the entrance.

A wooden door suspended from wire can be improvised that will allow skunks to leave a burrow but not re-enter. Burrows sealed from early May to mid-August may leave young skunks trapped in the den, causing starvation and odor problems. If these young are mobile, they can usually be box-trapped easily.

In cases where skunks have entered a garage, cellar, or house, leave the doors open and allow the skunks to exit on their own accord. Do not prod or disturb them.

Skunks that have become trapped in cellar window wells or similar pits can be removed by nailing cleats at 6-inch intervals to a board. When the board is lowered into the well (slowly, so as to not startle the skunk), the skunk will climb out.

Skunks are mild-tempered animals that usually will not defend themselves until they are cornered or harmed. Before discharging their scent, they give warnings by rapidly stamping their forefeet and arching their tails over their backs. Retreat slowly and quietly. Avoid loud noises and quick, aggressive movement.

ODOR REMOVAL
Most people find the smell of skunk musk nauseating. Because of its persistence, the scent is difficult to remove. Diluted solutions of vinegar or tomato juice can eliminate most of the odor from pets, people, or clothing. Clothing also can be soaked in weak solutions of household chlorine bleach or ammonia. On camping trips, clothing can be smoked over cedar or juniper fire. Neutroleum alpha is a scent-masking solution that can be applied to the sprayed area to reduce the odor. It's available through some commercial cleaning suppliers.

Walls or structural areas that have been sprayed by skunks can be washed down with vinegar or tomato juice solutions or sprayed with neutroleum alpha. The musk is yellow and sometimes can be seen. In this case, treat that area directly. Where skunks have discharged under houses, providing temporary cross ventilation will speed odor dissipation.

Where musk has entered the eyes, severe burning and tearing may occur. Temporary blindness of 10 to 15 minutes may result. Rinse the eyes with water to speed recovery.

BENEFITS OF SKUNKS

Skunks should not be needlessly destroyed. Skunks are beneficial to farmers, gardeners, and landowners because they feed on a large number of agricultural and garden pests. They prey on field mice and rats that can girdle trees or cause health problems. Occasionally they eat moles, which damage lawns. Insects such as white grubs, cutworms, potato beetle grubs, and other species that damage lawns, crops, or hay are also eaten. Skunks occasionally feed on ground-nesting birds, but their impact is usually minimal because of the large abundance of alternative foods.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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