

Natural. Valued. Protected.

STRIPED SKUNK (*Mephitis mephitis*)

Fall 2009

Life Cycle

Skunks live an average of four years in the wild, but may live as long as 13 years. Breeding usually occurs during February or March. Females give birth 60 to 77 days later. The average litter size is four to seven young, but can range anywhere from one to 10. The young are weaned at five weeks, but usually stay before dispersing in the spring.

Description:

Skunks have a stocky body and have short legs with long claws for digging. They have a glossy black coat with a white stripe on their forehead and two white stripes along their backs. Skunks can be up to 45 centimetres long (excluding the tail) and weigh up to 5.5 kilograms. Skunks also have very well developed anal scent glands.

Hibernation:

Usually, skunks are inactive for four or five months during the winter but they are not true hibernators and may be active during milder winters. A mother and young may den together over winter.

Habitat:

Skunks live throughout most of Ontario preferring open woodlands, grassland or urban areas. Skunks' territories may overlap; the animals are not confrontational about territory. Skunks are ground dwellers and prefer dark quiet areas like woodpiles, and under sheds, decks, stairs and porches. During summer, skunks prefer above ground den sites, but in winter seek below ground sites. Pregnant females also prefer below ground den sites.

Diet:

Skunks eat berries, insects, grubs, worms, hornets, bees, eggs, and vegetables.

Behaviour:

Skunks are normally nocturnal, but may be active during the day while breeding or if their den site has been disturbed. People usually see skunks during dawn and dusk hours.

Males are solitary but may hibernate with a female. Females will frequently share dens with other females. Skunks are shy, docile animals and will avoid confrontation unless attacked.

When threatened, confronted or attacked, they will release a thick yellowish-green liquid from the base of their tail. They can spray up to six-metres. If the spray is ingested, the musk poisons the central nervous system and, in large doses, can cause death. A skunk gives a quick warning before it sprays. It may hiss, click its teeth and stamp its front feet. Skunks are not immune to their own spray. Skunks don't normally run away from anything. Instead they amble and use their obvious form of defence.

Skunks forage close to their dens and usually travel the same routes. When the young are old enough, they follow their mother on the nightly rounds in a line behind her to mimic her behaviour.

Predators:

Natural predators include coyotes, hawks, owls and foxes.

Diseases:

In North America, skunks are carriers of three common wildlife diseases: rabies, distemper and mange. Animals with these diseases can exhibit similar symptoms which may include staggering, loss of fear of humans, decreased weight, and poor coat condition. It is also unusual for skunks to be disoriented, to run in circles, have a limp or dragging tail or have paralyzed hind limbs.

Fleas, ticks and other parasites can also infect skunks.

Rabies and distemper are both viral diseases. Rabies can be transmitted to non-immunized humans, livestock and pets, usually by exposure to saliva of an infected animal. Distemper cannot be transmitted to humans or immunized pets. Distemper is transmitted through contact with the excretions or secretions of infected animals. A mite transmits Mange, which is not as common in skunks as rabies and distemper. It can be transmitted to humans and pets. Symptoms include an itching red rash.

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Ontario.ca/rabies