



Mother skunk carries its bay by the scruff while two others are in tow.

Raising a Stink

Skunks are best known for what they leave behind.

For a number of weeks I have noticed that a corner which I pass in my car each day has the bouquet of striped skunk. Some days the odor is stronger than others. I don't see any road kill; there is just the smell of anal musk. So I wondered what series of phenomena might be responsible for the lingering smell over a span of several weeks. Time to learn more about *mephitis mephitis* or, roughly translated, noxious vapor, the striped skunk that is prevalent throughout much of North America. One story says that it's an

Algonquian Indian word meaning
"urinating fox."

Male skunks will compete for mating rights, and if push comes to shove they are not immune to their own main defense mechanism, the oily spray from their anal glands/ sacs. The chemical composition is two thiols, also called mercaptan, composed of sulfur and hydrogen. If a female is not in the mood for amour she may spray a suitor. So now when I round the corner I envision a major love triangle and lots of jilted pursuers.

Skunks are best known for their lingering impression. They are in the order carnivora, all of which have scent glands, e.g. dogs, cats, racoons, weasels, hyaenas, seals, walruses, and river otter (Nowak, R.M.) But not all of these are repulsive; in fact beaver are said to smell of vanilla. A beaver does not live on the corner!

There are two anal glands or sacs on the sides of the anus that can propel skunk spray accurately 10' - and by some reports 20'. They can unload up to six times before a 10-day period is necessary to refill the glands. The good news is they are reluctant to unload unless the threat seems real, in case a true peril is forthcoming. So in hopes of dissuading an attacker they will often

stomp their feet, squeal, and hiss before spraying. Good for us but bad for many dogs who are just dumb enough to rise to the occasion. The spray can temporarily blind an attacker. A 1999 study published in Chemical Educator suggests that high concentrations can even be potentially fatal to humans. I have found no records of fatalities, in fact some folks can't smell the odor and are unaffected by it. That would not be me. Musk can successfully repel some pretty major predators like bear, wolves, foxes, and badgers, yet eagles, owls, hawks and possibly others are apparently not impacted.

If you or your pet are sprayed leave the tomato juice in the cupboard; it is not a good choice for thiols. The recommended formula for alleviating the lingering odors is a mixture of ¼ cup baking soda, 1-2 teaspoons of a grease cutting liquid detergent like New Dawn, a quart of 3-percent hydrogen peroxide. Currently I simply keep a product on hand for my spaniels who seem to think, each time, that messing with skunks will somehow produce a different end result. Plus peroxide can bleach hair and I'm not opting for platinum blonde for either my spaniels or me.

A skunk's diet consists of predominantly insects. In fact they are considered to be more beneficial in our yards than not. Those with perfectly manicured lawns may not appreciate that they dig for grubs. Yet besides eliminating pest insects they eat field mice, moles, lizards, poisonous spiders, berries, roots, leaves, fungi, nuts, and snakes. Ground nesting birds and eggs are rarely eaten. *Ophiophagy* is the term for the eating of snakes. Some animals with this ability, like the skunk, are immune to venom. Our opossum story mentioned their immunity and its link to peptides. In the skunk other mechanisms are at play. One source stated that skunks stare in a manner that charms the snake into immobility. In some parts of the world farmers enlist ophiophagous animals to rid properties of poisonous snakes i.e. in India, the mongoose.

At times people can be less tolerant of skunks on their property. They eat eggs, so if you have a hen house that's an issue They will also scratch at beehives. Excluding them with a barrier is best because adults do not climb well. Feeding cats outside attracts skunks, raccoons, and foxes, all of which can harbor rabies. Skunks are crepuscular, primarily moving about from dusk to dawn. Avoid skunks that appear to be aggressive or are active

during the day, although this is not necessarily indicative of rabies. The Humane Society of US (www.humanesociety.org/resources/what-to-do-about-skunks) provides some good info on the topic of dissuading or removing skunks, as do many pest control websites.

After breeding in late winter or early spring, gestation lasts for about 2 months. The 2-10 kits are altricial or in need of further care. They have very little fur but their skin has the pigment of the well-known black with white stripes that will define them.



Note: skin pigment color

It is said that their prominent markings are showing off that they are noxious and not to be bothered. Evidently my dogs did not get the memo, not even after multiple demonstrations. Young skunks are raised in a den by their mother; males are absent from the parenting process. After 6-7 weeks,

when weaned, the kits will follow their mother about for as much as a year; early on they march single file. They tend to stay within a half mile of the lair.

Their dens are normally old fox or woodchuck holes. They will make use of hollow trees, foundations, areas under sheds, and the like. If your corner of the world has a skunk love triangle in progress you may need greater tolerance, a Havahart trap, an exterminator, or some other imaginative solution. But whatever you choose know that skunks are primarily beneficial and in my opinion very cute at a distance.

Strategies to Deal with Skunks

Skunks are generally benign. Conflicts can arise if they get under buildings or other confined spaces. They can get into trash that has been turned over by larger animals but they are not climbers. Steps you can take to discourage them when necessary:

- Place an ammonia-soaked towel in a den's entrance.
- Install a one-way door until you are sure they have vacated. Sometimes

wads of newspaper stuffed in the entrance can help you to know they have left. And it sometimes acts as a mild harassment to encourage departure.

- Animals trapped in window wells can escape if you offer a slightly angled ramp.
- Animals in your house should be given an open door for leaving.
- Never chase or excite a skunk. Remaining calm is highly recommended.

(Sources: many states' Depts. of Natural Resource websites and US Humane Society)