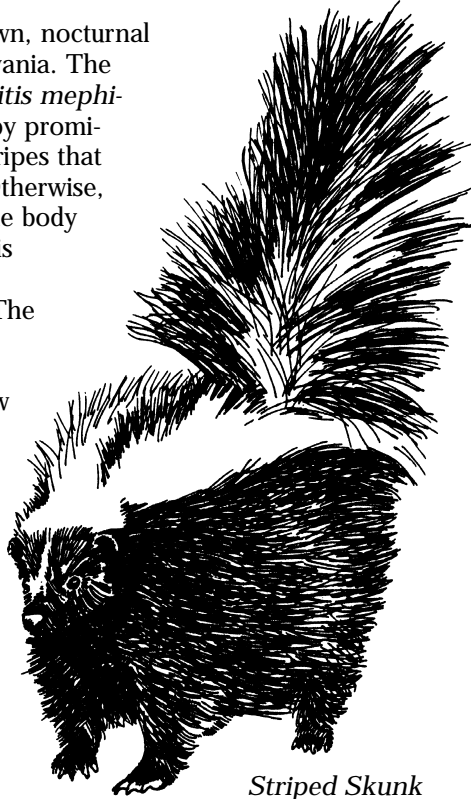


# Skunks

Skunks are well-known, nocturnal residents of Pennsylvania. The striped skunk, *Mephitis mephitis*, is characterized by prominent, lateral white stripes that run down its back. Otherwise, its fur is jet black. The body of the striped skunk is about the size of an ordinary house cat. The spotted skunk, *Spilogale putorius*, which occurs in a few south central Pennsylvania counties, is more weasel-like, and is readily distinguishable by white spots and short, broken white stripes in a dense jet-black coat. Because the striped skunk is more common and more likely to come into contact with people, this fact sheet will stress actions associated with them.



Striped Skunk

Skunks have earned their negative reputation through the odor of their musk. The repugnant odor lingers for days and can be nauseating. In addition, skunks sometimes set up their dens too close to a human dwelling or dig in a well manicured lawn for insects. These problems can be alleviated through various damage control techniques described below.

## General biology

Skunks are common throughout Pennsylvania. Their populations range from 2 to 50 individuals per square mile. Adult skunks begin breeding in late February through late March. Older females bear young during the first part of May, while yearling females bear young in early June. There usually is only one litter annually. Litters commonly consist of 4 to 6 young.

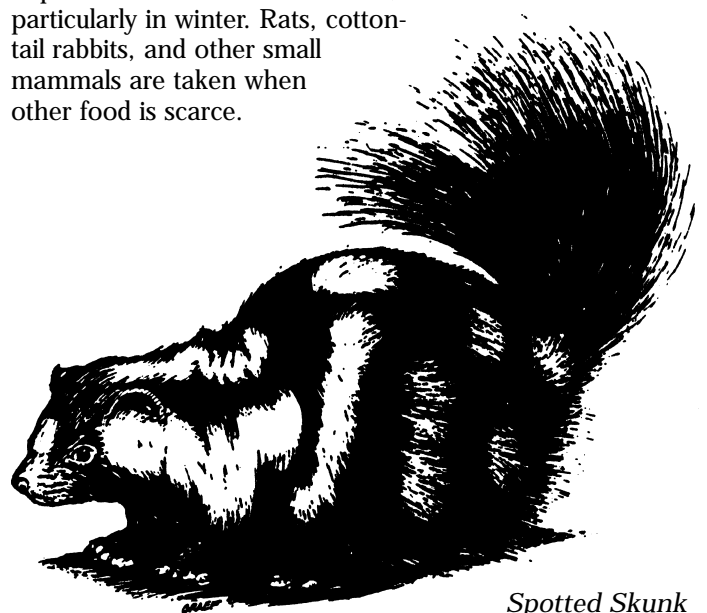
The normal home range of the skunk is 0.5 to 2 miles in diameter. During the breeding season, a male may travel 4 to 5 miles each night. Skunks are dormant for about a

month during the coldest part of winter. They may den together in winter for warmth, but generally are not sociable. They are nocturnal in habit, rather slow-moving and deliberate, and have great confidence in defending themselves against other animals.

Skunks can carry rabies. When a skunk becomes infected with the virus, it may not be apparent for many days. Any skunk showing abnormal behavior, such as daytime activity, may be rabid and should be treated with caution. In addition, avoid overly aggressive skunks that approach without hesitation. For additional information on rabies, see Wildlife Damage Control Fact Sheet No. 1 "Rabies."

Skunks traditionally inhabited clearings, pastures, and open lands bordering forests, but with the urbanization of rural areas, people and skunks have come in closer contact. In urban areas, skunks may den under decks and sheds or under loose foundations. They also establish dens in hollow logs or may use old woodchuck burrows.

Skunks are highly beneficial to farmers, gardeners, and landowners because they feed on large numbers of agricultural and garden pests. They eat plant and animal matter in about equal amounts during fall and winter, but eat considerably more animal matter during spring and summer when insects, their preferred food, are more available. They seem to prefer grasshoppers, white grubs, beetles, and crickets. In autumn, skunks consume berries and other vegetative matter. Field and house mice are regular and important items in the skunk diet, particularly in winter. Rats, cottontail rabbits, and other small mammals are taken when other food is scarce.



Spotted Skunk

## Damage and damage identification

Skunks become a nuisance when their burrowing and feeding habits cause problems for humans. They may burrow under porches or buildings by entering foundation openings. Skunks dig holes in lawns, golf courses, and gardens to search for insect grubs found in the soil. Digging normally appears as small cone-shaped holes or patches of up-turned earth, up to 3 to 4 inches in diameter. Other animals such as dogs and squirrels also dig in yards, but do not usually produce circular holes.

Skunks also may cause damage in agricultural situations. For example, they occasionally feed on corn, take poultry or eggs, or damage beehives. Because many other animals cause similar damage, it is important to try and identify the problem species before undertaking control measures. Skunk damage to corn is characterized by damage to the lower ears while the stalk remains standing. When skunks kill poultry, they usually only take one or two individuals at a time and generally will not climb over fences. Eggs are usually opened on one end with the edges crushed inward. Weasels, mink, dogs and raccoons usually kill several chickens or ducks at a time. Dogs will often severely mutilate poultry.

Tracks may be used to identify a damage perpetrator. Both the hind and forefeet of skunks have five toes. In some cases, the fifth toe may not be obvious. Claws are usually visible, but the heels of the forefeet normally are not. Skunk droppings often can be identified by the undigested insect parts they contain. Droppings are 1/4 to 1/2 inch in diameter and 1 to 2 inches long.

Odor is not always a reliable indicator of the presence or absence of skunks. Sometimes dogs, cats, or other animals that have been sprayed by skunks move under houses and make owners mistakenly believe skunks are present.

## Legal status

Striped skunks are considered furbearers, so they are provided legal protection. A hunting license is required before trapping skunks unless they are causing damage to the property. If it is possible in your area, allowing trappers onto your property during trapping season (October through February) may alleviate your problem while allowing the trapper some income and recreation. If skunks

are causing damage, the property owner may trap or remove skunks without a hunting license.

## Damage control

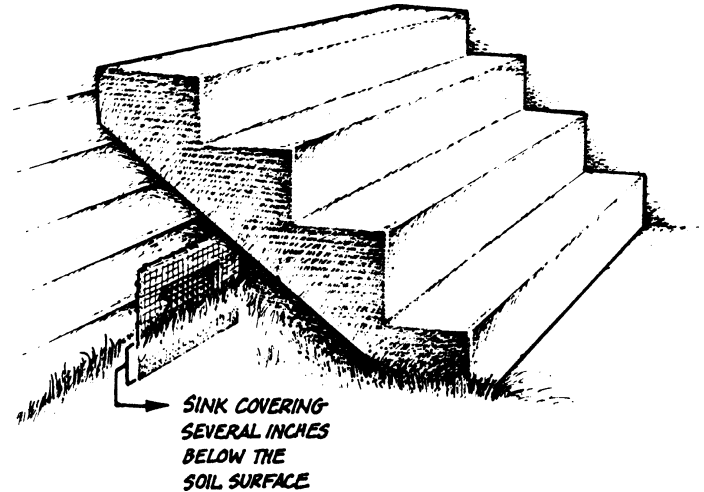
Many damage control techniques are available for use by homeowners, but because of the tendency of skunks to spray musk and their potential for carrying rabies, many homeowners do not feel they can appropriately handle the problem. Local wildlife pest control operators can be contacted to remove skunks and other nuisance wildlife. These individuals have experience removing animals and allow the homeowner to alleviate the problem without coming in contact with the animal. For more information regarding these companies, contact your county extension office or the yellow pages.



*Fore foot*



*Hind foot*



## Exclusion

Keep skunks from denning under buildings by sealing off all foundation openings. Cover all openings with wire mesh, sheet metal, or concrete. Bury fencing 1 1/2 to 2 feet in areas where skunks could gain access by digging. Seal all ground-level openings into poultry buildings and close the doors at night. Poultry yards and coops without subsurface foundations may be fenced with 3-foot wire mesh fencing. Bury the lowest foot of fencing with the bottom 6 inches bent 90 degrees outward from the yard or building. Skunks can be excluded from window wells or similar pits with mesh fencing or fiberglass domes. Place beehives on stands 3 feet high. It may be necessary to install aluminum guards around the bases of hives if skunks attempt to climb the supports. Use tight-fitting lids to keep skunks out of garbage cans.

## Habitat modification

Properly dispose of garbage or other food sources that will attract skunks. Skunks are often attracted to rodents living

in barns, crawl spaces, sheds, and garages. Rodent control programs may be necessary to eliminate this attraction. Debris such as lumber, fence posts, and junk cars provide shelter for skunks, and may encourage them to use an area. Clean up the area to discourage skunks. To reduce skunk damage to lawns resulting from digging for grubs, use an appropriate insecticide to control the insects. Be aware that insecticides may affect other species. Discontinue leaving pet food outside if skunks are in the area.

### **Repellents**

There are no registered repellents for skunks. Many mammals can occasionally be discouraged from entering enclosed areas with moth balls or moth flakes (naphthalene), however, this material needs to be used in sufficient quantities and replaced often if it is to be effective. It is an odor repellent and the odor must be strong enough to cause the animal to leave. Placing lights or radios in the enclosed area may deter skunks, but this method does not have a high success rate. Repellents are only a temporary measure. Permanent solutions require other methods.

### **Toxicants**

No toxicants are registered for use in controlling skunks.

### **Fumigants**

Two types of gas cartridges are registered for fumigating skunk burrows. One contains sodium nitrate and sulfur, and the other contains potassium nitrate and sulfur. Fumigation kills skunks and any other animals present in the burrows by suffocation or toxic gases. Follow label directions and take care to avoid fire hazards when used near structures. These are not to be used near crop areas or under buildings. Fumigants can be purchased at your local garden supply store.

### **Trapping**

Skunks can be caught in live traps set near the entrance to their den. When a den is used by more than one animal, set several traps to reduce capture time. Live traps may be purchased or built. They should be approximately 10 x 10 x 30 inches in size. Use canned fish-flavored cat food to lure skunks into traps. Other food baits such as peanut butter, sardines, and chicken entrails also are effective. Before setting live traps, cover them with canvas 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. Gently remove the trap from the area. Skunks should be released at least 10 miles from the capture site or humanely destroyed. Releasing skunks may not be permitted during periods of high rabies incidence.

### **Removing a resident skunk**

The following steps are suggested for removing skunks already established under buildings.

- Seal all possible entrances along the foundation, but leave the main burrow entrance open.
- Sprinkle a thin layer of flour 2 feet in circumference on the ground in front of the opening.
- After dark, examine the flour for tracks that indicate that the skunk has left to feed. If tracks are not present, reexamine in an hour.
- After the den is empty, cover the remaining entrance immediately.
- Reopen the entrance the next day for 1 hour after dark to allow any remaining skunks to exit before permanently sealing the entrance.

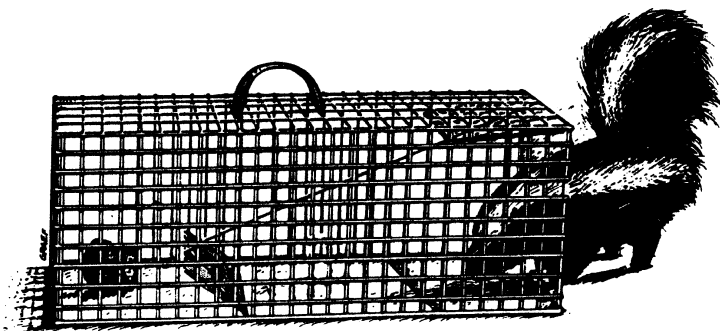
A one way door over the opening can be improvised to allow skunks to leave a burrow but not to reenter. The door can be made by cutting a piece of plywood larger than the opening. Attach it to the building with wire so it can be pushed open from the inside. Burrows sealed from early May to mid-August may leave young skunks trapped in the den. If these young are mobile they can usually be box-trapped easily using the methods previously described.

Where skunks have entered a garage, cellar, or house, open the doors to allow the skunks to exit on their own. Do not prod or disturb them. Skunks trapped in cellar window wells or similar pits may be removed by nailing narrow pieces of scrap lumber at 6-inch intervals to a board. Slowly lower the board into the well and allow the skunk to climb out on its own. Skunks are mild-tempered animals that will not defend themselves unless they are cornered or harmed.

Skunks usually provide a warning before discharging their scent, by stamping their forefeet rapidly and arching their tails over their backs. Anyone experiencing such a threat should retreat quietly and slowly. Loud noises and quick, aggressive actions should be avoided. Skunks become nervous when something is suddenly over them. When approaching a trapped skunk, move slowly and crouch down so as not to be looming over it.

### **Odor removal**

One of the most common concerns about skunks is dealing with the odor. Pets are commonly sprayed and come home covered in musk. Skunk scent is persistent and difficult to remove. Washing people, pets, or clothing with vinegar or tomato juice may eliminate most of the odor. A solution of hydrogen peroxide, baking soda, and liquid soap (see recipe below) may also be effective when used to wash down walls, pets, or clothing. Do not add water to the solution. Clothing may be soaked in a weak solution of household chloride bleach or ammonia. Remember not to mix chlorine bleach with ammonia. Neutroleum alpha is a scent-



masking solution that can be applied to the sprayed area to reduce the odor. It is 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 neutrolem alpha. Use ventilation fans to speed up the process of odor dissipation. Scented candles can help mask odors if the odors are not too strong. When musk enters the eyes, severe burning and an excessive tear flow may occur. Temporary blindness of 10 or 15 minutes may result. Rinse the eyes with copious amounts of water to speed recovery.

#### **Recipe for skunk odor removal solution**

1 quart (.95 L) 3% hydrogen peroxide  
0.25 cup (70 g) baking soda  
1 teaspoon (5 ml) liquid soap  
Mix together and apply.

#### **Summary**

When left undisturbed, skunks are peaceful and provide insect and rodent control. Because of their nocturnal nature, one could be living on your property for years before you ever realize it. When a problem does arise, make sure to first identify whether a skunk is causing the problem and then follow these guidelines to solve the problem.

#### **Facts to remember**

- Skunks are active at night, so night is a good time to close off entrances to dens.
- Skunk odor near your home is not necessarily an indication of a resident skunk. A neighbor's pet may have been sprayed with the musk and moved in under your deck.
- The most effective means of avoiding skunk problems is to remove denning sites under and around structures such as garages and homes.
- There are no toxicants or repellents registered in PA for use on skunks.
- Skunks eat many pest species that cause damage to lawns and vegetation. In most situations, skunks are more beneficial than problematic.

#### **Materials and suppliers**

The following are suppliers of control products. Many of these products can be purchased in local garden supply stores, feed mills, and department stores. If products are unavailable locally, they can likely be ordered from the following companies. This list is not necessarily complete, and the inclusion of names does not imply endorsement by The Pennsylvania State University of a product. Local laws may regulate the use of some tools and techniques and should be consulted before control activities are begun.

#### **Odor Control**

##### **(Neutrolem Alpha)**

Pocatello Supply Depot  
USDA-APHIS-Animal  
Damage Control  
238 E. Dillon St.  
Pocatello, ID 83201  
(208) 236-6920  
(208) 236-6922 FAX

##### **Live Traps**

##### **(cage- or box-type)**

H. B. Sherman Traps, Inc.  
Box 20267  
Tallahassee, FL 32316  
(904) 575-8727

Tomahawk Live Trap Co.  
Box 323  
Tomahawk, WI 54487  
(715) 453-3550  
(800) 27A-TRAP  
(715) 453-4326 FAX

Wildlife Management Supplies  
Critter Control, Inc.  
640 Starkweather Rd.  
Plymouth, MI 48170  
(313) 453-6300  
(800) 451-6544

#### **Acknowledgments**

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