

Animal Damage Control



Integrated Pest Management,
Cooperative Extension Service,
North Dakota State University, Fargo, North Dakota
in cooperation with
U.S. Department of Agriculture-APHIS Animal Damage Control



ADC-1



SKUNKS

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The largest and most common skunk in North Dakota is the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*). A smaller species, the spotted skunk (*Spilogule putorius*), may occur in the extreme southeastern corner of the state.

The striped skunk is about the size of a large house cat and weighs about 4 to 5 pounds. Striped skunks are black with two broad white stripes running from the back of the head to the tip of the large bushy tail.

Spotted skunks are about half the size of their striped cousin, and have four irregular, interrupted white stripes beginning below the eyes and running to the tail (Figure 1).

Besides being infamous for spraying when threatened, skunks cause other types of damage. They will raid poultry houses for eggs and dig up lawns, golf courses and other sodded areas searching for white grubs and earthworms.

Skunks are of public health concern because they are the major wildlife vector for rabies in North Dakota. This disease is endemic in the skunk population throughout the state. The incubation period of rabies in infected animals is highly variable but can be extremely long. The length of time the disease is actually transmissible is also variable, ranging from three days to two weeks before the onset of symptoms. Once symptoms appear the disease will normally kill the infected animal within a few days.

Baby skunks can be infected with rabies through normal contact with their mother if she is rabid. Also, there is no vaccine available to immunize skunks against rabies. For all of these reasons, skunks should not be kept as pets.

Diseased animals may display abnormal behavior such as staggering, blundering walk, aggression toward people or other animals or daylight activity. Skunks displaying such abnormal behavior may be rabid and should be avoided or destroyed.

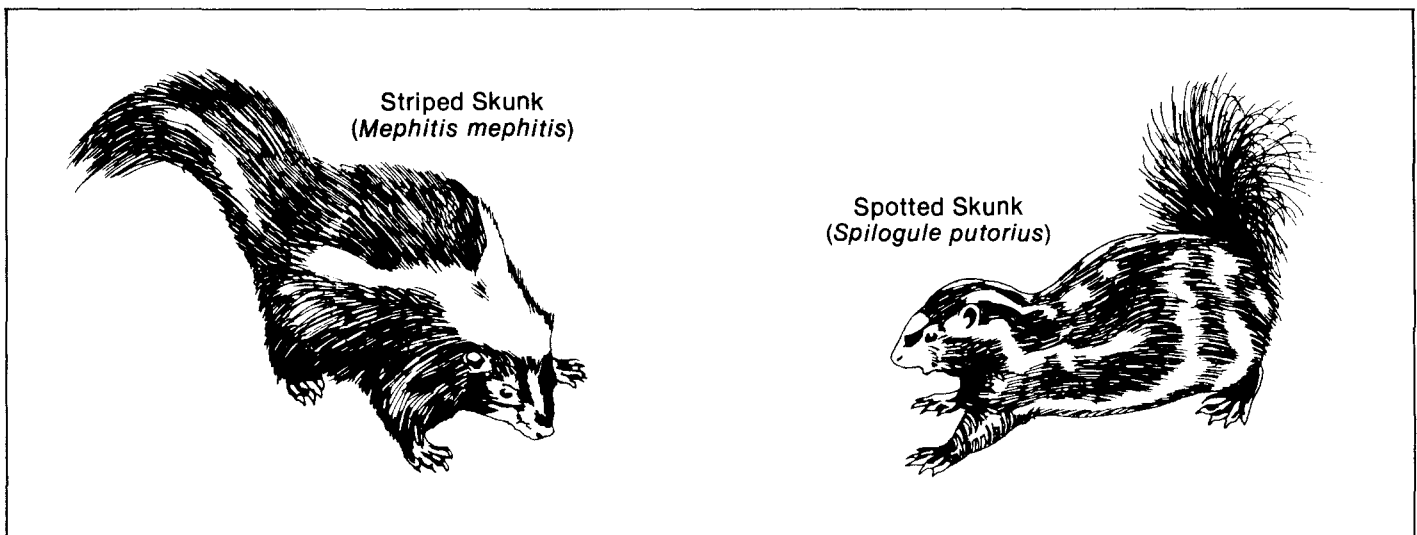


Figure 1

BIOLOGY AND BEHAVIOR

The burrow where the skunk spends most of its life may be 10 to 15 feet long, ending in a nest chamber filled with dried grasses and leaves. Abandoned fox, coyote or badger dens are readily used by skunks. Skunks prefer to do as little digging as possible, and if a ready made den site is not available, the skunk will set up housekeeping in brush piles, hollow logs, culverts or abandoned buildings.

Skunks are not particularly disturbed by man's presence or activities. They are just as willing to live in town or in the country. They may move in under someone's back porch, totally without the knowledge of the homeowner. That is, until the skunk meets the family dog at 2 a.m., then everyone senses its presence.

Striped skunks normally breed once a year during February. After a gestation period of about 63 days a litter of four to six thinly furred, blind young (kits) arrive in April or May. By late June or early July the kits leave the security of the den and follow their mother as she makes her nightly rounds in search of food.

Skunks will eat almost anything available. Large insects, mice, frogs, groundnesting birds and eggs as well as wild fruit and berries are all eaten by these small predators. Their love for eggs make them a major predator of waterfowl nests in the prairie pothole region.

Skunks do not hibernate, but may become dormant during periods of extreme cold. During the winter, they may form large communal dens, composed almost entirely of females with as many as 18 skunks in one den. Solitary male skunks are usually active all winter.

The life style and food habits of the spotted skunk are fairly similar to those of the striped skunk, with a few notable exceptions. The spotted skunk's gestation period (120+ days) is almost double that of their striped cousin. Also, spotted skunks are very agile and can easily climb trees to raid birds nests or escape other predators. Its ability to wage chemical warfare is not affected by the small size. The odor produced for protection is just as potent as that of the larger striped skunk.

LEGAL STATUS

Skunks are not protected under North Dakota state law. They may be taken at any time and by any method, provided local laws and ordinances such as discharging firearms within city limits are not violated.

ECONOMIC STATUS

The chief economic benefit of skunks is their destruction of agricultural pests. They consume large numbers of harmful pests such as cutworms, armyworms, grasshoppers, white grubs and field mice.

The detrimental aspects of skunks are their potentials for being serious predators on waterfowl and game bird nests; for transmitting rabies; for damaging turf in yards and golf courses while looking for food; and their odor.

CONTROL

Around Buildings

The best control around buildings is prevention. Do not allow skunks to establish themselves in or under buildings. All holes in foundations or other points of possible entry should be sealed using sheet metal, cement, hardware cloth or bricks.

If a skunk has already become established under a building, all openings but one should be sealed. Sprinkle a 2-foot square patch of flour in front of the one remaining opening. Check the flour patch two to three hours after dark for tracks. If the tracks show that the skunk has left, seal the opening at once. When the skunk returns and finds that he cannot get back in, he will leave the area. This method should not be used in April, May or June as there is a chance that young animals may be present and would be sealed in.

In Buildings

When a skunk has entered a garage, cellar or house, open the doors and allow the skunk to exit on its own. Do not prod or disturb the skunk since frightening it may cause the animal to spray.

If a skunk has become trapped in a window well or other pit, it can be removed by nailing cleats, at 6-inch intervals, to a board. Slowly lower the board, cleat side up, into the pit. The skunk will eventually climb out by himself.

Poultry Houses

A good tight 3-foot high chicken wire fence will keep skunks out of poultry houses. To prevent skunks from digging under the fence, a second "L" shaped section should be buried at least 6 inches deep and 6 inches out horizontal to the soil surface. The buried fence should be made of heavier material because chicken wire will rust out fairly quickly when buried. The two sections of fence should be tied together with hog-rings spaced every 4 to 6 inches.

An alternative would be to install a one or two-strand electric fence about 1 foot out from the existing fence. Install the bottom strand about 6 inches

off the ground. The second strand should be 6 to 8 inches above the lower strand. Grasses and weeds along the electric fence should be controlled with herbicides or mowing.

Trapping

Skunks can be trapped using either leg hold traps (1 or 1½) or wire live traps (Tomahawk No. 105 or 106, Havahart 2A)¹.

For the average homeowner, live trapping is the easiest and most productive method. Live traps should be placed inside of a burlap sack or large dark plastic bag so it is dark inside the trap. Enclosing the trap in this manner will usually prevent the skunk from spraying when it is caught and the trap is handled. Bait the trapped with canned cat or dog food, sardines, chicken parts or similar material. Traps should be set near the den entrance or along trails used by skunks (Figure 2).

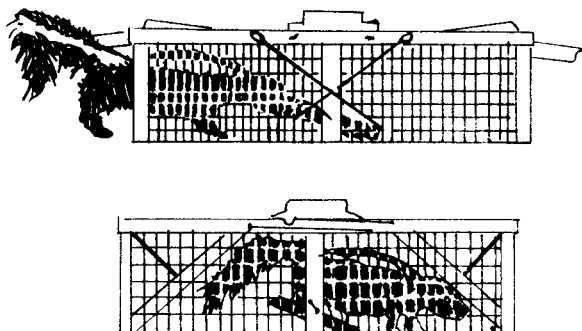


Figure 2. Skunks are easily captured alive in cage traps. It is best to wrap such traps with canvas or burlap before they are set.

Drowning is the best method of killing the animal once it is trapped. Drowned skunks generally will not spray. Dead animals should be disposed of by deep burial. Because of potential disease problems, relocation of trapped skunks is not recommended.

Lawn Damage

Skunk damage to lawns, golf courses or other sodded areas can be reduced or eliminated by eliminating the white grubs the skunks are rooting for. Skunks will not dig in sod where there are no soil insects. For the control of white grubs in lawns, the insecticides Dursban or Diazinon may be used in either the liquid or granular form. Apply the insecticides according to label directions.

¹The use of trade names is done only for the reader convenience and does not constitute endorsement of the product by USDA/APHIS/ADC, nor is criticism implied of similar products which are not mentioned.

For more information on white grub control in lawns, contact the local County Cooperative Extension Office.

Shooting

Skunks normally travel after dark. Hunting at night is usually more successful. When hunting, always be certain it is safe and legal. **WARNING:** a shot skunk will almost always spray.

Gas Cartridges/Burrow Fumigants

The only burrow fumigant currently registered in the state for skunk control is the Giant Destroyer, manufactured by the Atlas Chemical Corporation, Cedar Rapids, Iowa. They can be purchased at most local hardware stores. This product is a 1×6 inch cartridge filled with combustible materials that must be ignited by lighting a fuse. Use caution when using this product because sparks from it can ignite dead grass, buildings or other combustible material.

Giant Destroyers kill by burning the oxygen out of the air so the animal dies of asphyxiation. Complete user instructions are supplied with the product.

Odor Removal

Skunk spray is composed of butyl mercaptans, an organic sulfur dioxide compound in a volatile oil base. This material is so penetrating and persistent that no remedy is likely to be totally effective.

Neutrolem alpha is probably the most effective chemical for neutralizing skunk odor. To reduce skunk odor in homes, saturate wads of cotton, rags or pieces of clay with neutrolem alpha and place them around the contaminated rooms. Repeat as necessary. A soap and water bath with 1 to 2 tablespoons of neutrolem alpha added will greatly reduce skunk odor when washing clothing, carpets, pets and people.

Ammonia, household bleach, canned tomato juice, lemon juice or vinegar are all home remedies that can be used to help remove skunk odor from clothing and pets. **Never mix ammonia and household bleach.** Mixing ammonia and bleach can generate deadly chlorine gas.

Ammonia or bleach should be diluted according to package directions when decontaminating pets. Sponge off the pet, avoiding the eyes, nose and mouth. Do not immerse the pet. Washable surfaces such as walls and floors can be scrubbed down with suds-type ammonia.

If further assistance with a skunk problem is needed, contact the Extension Wildlife Specialist, Stevens Hall, NDSU, Fargo, ND 58105 or the USDA, APHIS, Animal Damage Control Office, 1500 Capitol Avenue, Bismarck, ND 58501.

