Mephitis mephitis

Striped Skunk


Other names:

Physical Description: The striped skunk is the most common skunk found throughout the US, Canada and Mexico. These opportunistic feeders are bout the size of a house cat, with a large body, small head, and short legs. Their front feet have longer and much better developed claws than the hind feet. Each foot has five toes. Skunks have 34 teeth, including 4 pointed and sharp canine teeth. Skunk fur is rather long, and longer on tails than on bodies. Underfur is white under the white guard hairs, and grayish under the black colored guard hairs. Their large, bushy tail and two snow-white stripes extending along either side of the black back and into the tail are the trademarks of the striped skunk. Coloration, however, is highly variable within the species. Ohio skunks range from completely black to almost pure white. The two white stripes, usually present on the back, may be broad and continuous or narrow and incomplete. Most striped skunks have a white line extending back from the nose between the eyes and onto the forehead. Even in the predominantly black animals there usually is a white tip on the end of the tail. Striped skunks average 6-10 lbs. and 20-31” in total length; males are typically larger than females.

Diet in the Wild: Omnivorous: nuts, grasses, leaves, grubs, insects, mice, shrews, eggs, carrion, berries, frogs, fish, crayfish, and garbage.

Diet at the Zoo: cat food, dog food, yogurt, apples, bananas, cooked sweet potatoes, cooked carrots

Habitat & Range: Open woodlands, brushy areas, fields; generally inhabits natural crevices or dens abandoned by other animals; old buildings and woodpiles. It is found in the US, Canada and Mexico. Skunks inhabit urban as well as suburban areas. It is usually never further than 2 miles from water.

Life Span: 10 years in captivity; record in captivity is nearly 15 years. Up to 6 years in the wild

Perils in the wild: Striped skunks have few predators but these include great horned owls, red tailed hawks, barred owls, golden and bald eagles, red foxes, coyotes, bobcats, and man. Only a desperately hungry carnivore is willing to risk a certain musk bath for a meal.

Physical Adaptations:
- It is thought that the black and white coloration serves as a warning to other animals.
- Well-developed scent glands located at the base of the tail contain about 1 tablespoon of oily musk (enough for five to six discharges). The fluid is replaced at a rate of about two teaspoonfuls a week. Spraying is the ultimate response to danger and employed only after much provocation.
- Short legs with webbed toes and claws used for digging and looking for food.
- Poor vision at a distance of more than 2 or 3 feet. A keen sense of smell makes up for their poor vision and enables them to easily locate foods, which vary with the season.

Behavioral Adaptations:
- Primarily nocturnal. It sleeps in its burrow during the day and hunts at night.

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• Except when young are present, skunks are usually solitary animals. However, in the colder parts of their range, they may gather in communal dens for warmth; one male with several females.
• It usually doesn't dig its own burrow. It looks for an abandoned burrow or a natural hollow under a tree or building instead. They build a den in a protected place. A skunk den can have up to five entrances. The den usually has between one and three chambers. One of the chambers is used as a nest, with the skunk adding dried leaves and grass.
• Striped skunks are strong swimmers but rarely enter water
• Skunks are not true hibernators, but will fatten up for winter and spend long periods in their den. They typically change dens every day or two during summer, as soon as the young are able to travel.
• Although they are normally silent, striped skunks hiss, screech, churr, growl, twitter, and make cooing sounds in social encounters or when alarmed.
• Feet stamping and backward shuffling are motor patterns associated with threat to warn off predators. That’s why they often get hit by cars, as they are trying to “warn off” the oncoming car.
• Striped skunks do not spray each other in aggressive interactions, but substances from other glands play a likely role in their behavior.
• With their short, stubby legs, it isn’t easy for a skunk to outrun a predator. The striped skunk has developed a unique defense system.
  o When a skunk is threatened, it first tries to run away from the predator.
  o If that doesn’t work, it tries to frighten the predator by arching its back, raising its tail and turning its back on the predator. It may also stomp its feet.
  o If this doesn't work, as a last resort, the skunk turns its body in a U-shaped position with the tail and head facing the intruder, arches its spine and, lifting its tail, the striped skunk sprays the musk which is discharged with great accuracy of up to 15 feet. The mist may travel 3 times as far and the scent may be carried downwind a mile.
  o This foul smelling spray can sting the eyes of the predator giving the skunk time to get away

Reproduction and Development:
• Adults do not form pair bonds; males associate briefly with a female when mating but do not exhibit any parental behavior.
• Females can use delayed implantation.
• Striped skunks mate from mid-February to mid-March.
• One litter per year of three to nine (average four to seven) young born in April to June after a pregnancy of at least two months.
• Babies are blind and deaf when they are born, eyes open at about three weeks or later; weaned six to ten weeks; color pattern is evident almost from birth.
• They will nurse in the den for about a month and a half. After they leave the den they may stay with their mother for up to a year.
• It is thought that musk is present at birth, although in a much less potent form than in the adult. By eight days, the young’s musk odor can be emitted.
• There is some discrepancy in the literature with regard to the age at which the young skunk develops enough muscle coordination to enable it to actually spray (as opposed to merely ejecting a drop or two of) musk. At least one source suggests this may be as early as two weeks; however, others indicate that it may be as late as four to six weeks.
Skunks are found only in the New World. Four types of skunks occur in the United States: the spotted, the striped, the hooded and the hog-nosed. All species of skunk have black and white fur, but the patterns of their coats vary. The hog-nosed is the only skunk native to South America.

While seldom employed, the chemical defense is so effective that the skunk’s name and reputation derive from it. *Mephitis* means “an offensive smell; a stench; a poisonous or foul-smelling gas emitted from the earth.”

The skunks used in zoo demonstrations have been de-scented.

Skunks are one of the primary predators of the honeybee, relying on their thick fur to protect them from stings. The skunk scratches at the front of the beehive and eats the guard bees that come out to investigate.

Skunks do not hibernate but may sleep underground for several weeks at a time throughout the winter months, emerging briefly if the weather is mild.

Striped skunks are generally beneficial to man. Their fur is durable and of good texture. At one time the skunk ranked among the most important fur producers in Ohio.

Skunks occasionally raid chicken houses and/or duck and goose nests. They are fond of bees and honey and sometimes invade hives. The amount of damage done in these few instances is more than compensated for by the myriads of insects and small rodents destroyed by this animal. They tend to dig up and spoil lawns in their search for insect larvae, which cause people to dislike them.

Skunk musk forms the base for some perfumes.

Skunks are subject to many diseases and are reportedly the principal carrier of rabies among North American wildlife.

**Conservation Status: (IUCN Status)**

**Conservation Efforts:**

**Sources:**

- Cincinnati Zoo & Botanical Gardens
- [http://www.nhptv.org/natureworks/stripedskunk.htm](http://www.nhptv.org/natureworks/stripedskunk.htm)
- [http://www.nationaltrappers.com/skunk.html](http://www.nationaltrappers.com/skunk.html)
- [http://www.esf.edu/aec/adks/mammals/stripped_skunk.htm](http://www.esf.edu/aec/adks/mammals/stripped_skunk.htm)