

LOUISIANA CRITTER CORNER

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STRIPED SKUNK

Mephitis mephitis

Tautonymy is the term used when the generic and specific names for an organism are the same. This feature is especially noteworthy in the case of the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*). The Latin translation for *Mephitis*, meaning "foul odor," is an appropriate reminder of a critter that almost anyone in Louisiana can recognize by scent alone. The species occurs widely throughout the United States and is found everywhere in Louisiana with the exception of extreme southeastern portions of the state. Striped skunks are omnivores, about the size of domestic cats with glossy black bodies and white paired stripes extending down the back. The amount of white on the tail will vary with individual skunks, some being entirely white. No two skunks appear to be exactly alike in the extent of white in the pelage (fur). Skunks sometimes occur with only a small white spot on the head. These animals are referred to as "stars" in the fur trade and bring premium prices when pelted and sold.

Throughout Louisiana, the exact presence of individual skunks is evident by the familiar scent and frequent numbers found dead along highways. The rarity of skunks from Louisiana's southeastern parishes is a mystery that even the famed LSU mammalogist Dr. George Lowery cannot explain. Trapping records from the 1931-1932 trapping season documented a record number of 122,679 skunks taken as part of the Louisiana fur trade. This number included the much less common spotted skunk, which normally accounted for a very small portion of total skunk furs. Recent comparative data of fur animals in our state shows a complete absence of skunks in the fur trade. This has more to do with the declining pelt prices, rather than a decrease in statewide numbers.



Female striped skunks usually come into heat in late winter and breeding is followed by an average 62 to 66 day gestation period. Litters usually consist of six or seven kits but can be as large as 10. Young skunks are born with eyes and ears closed but, before the end of the first month, these features open and small amounts of scent fluid can be discharged.

Problems and Control Measures

In Louisiana, skunks are classified as outlaw quadrupeds and can be disposed of year-round during daylight hours. Prior to initiating a control program, it should be noted that both striped and spotted skunks are extremely beneficial by consuming large numbers of rats, mice, and noxious insects around our homes and farms. Many times; however, benefits are outweighed by the burrowing and feeding habits of these animals. They often burrow under porches and buildings whereas at other times they will dig up lawns and gardens in search of insect grubs and

other food. In some cases, the damage left by skunks can resemble the slight rooting damage of armadillos. A foul odor in the area will usually indicate that the culprit was a striped or spotted skunk. On several occasions, homeowners have contacted me seeking information on how to rid skunks from underneath homes where they have taken residence. The strong ammonia-like odor left by these unwanted guests is a constant reminder of their presence. Skunks are not climbers, and any small fence can serve as a deterrent in their movements. All points from which skunks can gain access beneath buildings should be made inaccessible with the exception of one opening where a wire-cage live trap should be set. Cat food or sardines can be used as bait and traps should be completely covered with a canvas bag to prevent animals from discharging their scent when captured. The canvas creates a dark secure environment for the animal, allowing the skunk to be removed from the area prior to release or euthanasia. A heavy line can be secured to the trap cover in order to release animals at a distance and prevent spray exposure. Leg-hold traps should not be used to catch skunks near houses due to the likelihood of scent discharge. The scent from skunks is expelled through two tiny nipples located just inside the anus. This opening marks the outlet of two ducts leading from the scent-producing musk glands lying adjacent to the anus. When hit by a skunk's spray, diluted solutions of vinegar or tomato juice can be used to eliminate most of the odor from people, pets and clothing. Neutroleum alpha is a commercially available scent-masking solution that can be applied to sprayed areas to reduce odor.

The most potentially dangerous situation between humans and skunks can occur when skunks become infected with the rabies virus. This most often occurs when skunks are bitten by conspecifics or other mammals that are carrying the virus. The particular rabies strain that skunks are most often affected with is a form of raccoon rabies virus that is prevalent throughout the Eastern United States. The incidence of rabies in skunk populations in Louisiana varies greatly with many factors such as the density of skunks in an area as well as raccoon densities. Any animal that contracts the rabies virus and is not vaccinated, will succumb to the disease. For this reason skunks like other warm-blooded wildlife species are not true carriers of the disease. Their danger as far as transmitting the disease by biting other animals or humans will last only as long as the animal stays alive. Once the virus is present in the saliva, skunks will usually live for no more than 2 weeks. Any skunk which is found to be active and moving about during daylight hours and appears to have no fear of humans should be a concern for infection with the rabies virus. Animals that appear to stagger about and emit excessive amounts of saliva from their mouth are further signs that rabies could be at play. Common sense will naturally keep most people away from any skunk, but the potential for a rabid skunk to cross paths with a human is greatly enhanced by any animal in such a diseased condition.

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