

Skunks

Prepared by the **National Wildlife Control Training Program**. <http://WildlifeControlTraining.com>
Research-based, certified wildlife control training programs to solve human – wildlife conflicts.
One source for training, animal handling and control methods, and wildlife species information.



Figure 1. Eastern striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*).
Photo by Greg Clements.

Species Overview

Conflicts

The odor of skunk spray (musk) is pungent, nauseating, and can cause severe reactions in some people. Skunks may kill poultry and eat eggs. Skunks damage turf when digging for grubs and other soil-born insects. They may carry rabies.

Legal Status

In South Carolina, skunks are legally classified as a furbearer and can be taken by hunting or trapping during the open season. The season for trapping these animals is December 1 through March 1. Hunting season is Thanksgiving Day through March 1 on private lands with a valid hunting license. Anyone planning to trap skunks should be familiar with the regulations which govern this activity. Information on these regulations can be obtained online at: <http://www.dnr.sc.gov>.

A nuisance skunk can also be taken year-round with a **Depredation Permit**. A depredation permit is not required when controlling nuisance animals within 100 yards of a property owner's residence. This permit is issued by the S.C. Department of Natural Resources. To obtain a permit call your local wildlife management office or law enforcement field office. For further information: <http://www.dnr.sc.gov>.

Identification

Striped skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*) are members of the weasel family. Most are black with white stripes the length of the body (Figure 1), and are easily recognized by most people. Coat color is quite variable, however, and skunks may range from nearly all black, to all white.

Spotted skunks (*Spilogale putorius*) are also found in the highlands of South Carolina, although they are less common. Spotted skunks are usually smaller than striped skunks and have 4 – 6 white stripes starting at the head and breaking into spots towards the rump.

Physical Description

Skunks have short, stocky legs and feet equipped with well-developed claws that enable them to dig well. Skunks can discharge a nauseating musk from their anal glands and are capable of several discharges up to 10 feet.

Striped skunks are about the size of an ordinary house cat, up to 29 inches long and weighing 3 - 8 pounds. Spotted skunks are smaller, ranging in weight between 1 – 4 pounds.

Species Range

Striped skunks are common throughout the US. They may occur in both rural and suburban areas.

Health and Safety Concerns

Striped skunks are carriers of rabies. Any skunk showing abnormal behavior may be rabid and should be treated with caution. Report any skunks that are behaving abnormally to the local police department or animal control office. If bitten or scratched by a skunk, contact your local health department, and promptly seek medical advice. Have the skunk tested for rabies if possible.

Skunks usually provide a warning before discharging their scent by stamping their forefeet rapidly, and arching their tails over their backs. Anyone observing such a threat should retreat quietly and slowly. Avoid making loud noises and quick, aggressive actions. Skunk spray is not known to contain the rabies virus.

General Biology, Reproduction, and Behavior

Reproduction

Adult skunks begin breeding in late January. Gestation usually is 7 to 10 weeks, and litters commonly consist of 4 to 6 young. Young stay with the female until fall. Both sexes mature by the following spring. Skunks can live up to 10 years, but few live beyond 3 years in the wild.

During the breeding season, a male may travel 4 to 5 miles each night. Typically, a female that does not wish to mate with a particular male will spray him.

Nesting/Denning Cover

Skunks prefer to den under logs, in brush piles, and in abandoned woodchuck holes. They also den under decks, porches, crawl-spaces, and other secluded areas.

Behavior

Skunks may be dormant for about a month or two during the coldest part of winter. They may den together in winter for warmth, but generally are not sociable. They are crepuscular (most active at dawn and dusk), slow-moving, deliberate, and have great confidence in defending themselves against other animals.

Habitat

Skunks inhabit clearings, pastures, and open lands bordering forests. Often, skunks inhabit wooded urban areas.

Food Habits

Insects are the preferred food of skunks. Grasshoppers, beetles, and crickets are the adult insects most often taken. Skunks dig in lawns for grubs and other insect larvae. Mice are a regular and important item in the diet of skunks, particularly in winter. Rats, cottontail rabbits, and other small mammals are taken when other food is scarce.

Voice, Sounds, Tracks, and Signs

Skunks make noises ranging from screeches and whimpers to chirps. They stomp their front feet in a thump-thump combination when agitated.

Tracks of the hind feet of striped skunks are approximately 2½ inches long. Both the hind and forefeet of skunks have five toes. In some cases, the fifth toe may not be obvious. Claw marks usually are visible.

Droppings of skunks often can be identified by the undigested insect parts they contain. Droppings are $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch in diameter, and 1 to 2 inches long.

The musk of skunks can be detected for up to a mile away, but odor is not always a reliable indicator of the presence or absence of skunks. Opossums also emit a skunk-like odor, and any sprayed animal can carry the odor for long distances.

Damage Identification

Damage to Landscapes

Skunks dig holes in lawns, golf courses, and gardens to search for insect grubs found in the soil. Digging normally appears as small, 3-inch to 4-inch, cone-shaped holes or patches of upturned earth (Figure 2). Several other animals, including raccoons and domestic dogs, also may dig in lawns.



Figure 2. Damage by skunks in turf. Photo by Javier Gil.

Damage to Crops and Livestock

Skunks occasionally feed on corn, eating only the lower ears. If a cornstalk is knocked over, raccoons are more likely the cause of damage. Damage to the upper ears of corn often is indicative of birds, deer, or squirrels.

Rabid skunks bite and can transmit rabies to cattle, horses, dogs, and other domestic animals, which can in turn transmit rabies to humans.

Skunks occasionally kill poultry and eat eggs. They normally do not climb fences to get to poultry. Rats, weasels, mink, and raccoons regularly climb fences. If skunks gain access, they normally feed on eggs, and occasionally kill fowl. Eggs usually are opened on one end with the edges crushed inward. Weasels, mink, dogs, and raccoons usually kill several chickens or ducks at a time. Dogs often severely mutilate poultry.

Damage to Structures

Sprayed musk can cause damage to structures. Odor can penetrate and linger in cloth furniture, clothing, and carpets. Skunk odor can contaminate items several floors away from the original source.

Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Habitat Modification

Remove garbage, debris, and lumber piles to reduce the attractiveness of an area to skunks. Skunks prefer cover, and debris-filled areas provide excellent hunting grounds. Properly dispose of garbage or other food sources that may attract skunks. Rodents living in barns, crawl spaces, sheds, and garages often attract skunks. Control programs for rodents may be necessary to reduce the attraction.

Exclusion

Seal all ground-level openings to poultry buildings and close doors at night. Enclose poultry yards and coops that lack subsurface foundations with 3-foot, wire-mesh fencing buried a few inches below ground. Skunks can be excluded from window wells or similar pits

with mesh fences or window well covers. Use tight-fitting lids on garbage cans.

Keep skunks from denning under buildings by sealing all foundation openings. Cover all openings with wire mesh, sheet metal, or concrete. Where skunks can gain access by digging, bury ¼-inch mesh fences 2 inches below the ground, and extend the mesh out perpendicular from the location being protected at least 12 inches.

Skunks can be excluded from a structure using a one-way door (Figure 3). Secure the perimeter of a deck or shed with trench screen. Install a one-way door (minimum size 4 x 4 inches), over the entrance so that skunks can exit easily. Return after several days of good weather to evaluate the location. When confident the skunks are gone, remove the one-way door and secure the opening.



Figure 3. One-way door over entrance to the den of a skunk. The thin vertical sticks in the back will be knocked over if an animal moves through. Photo by Stephen M. Vantassel.

Frightening Devices

No frightening devices are effective on skunks.

Repellents

No repellents are registered for use on skunks.

Toxicants

No toxicants are registered for use on skunks in South Carolina.

Shooting

Legal hunting season on private lands in South Carolina for skunks is Thanksgiving Day through March 1. A free depredation permit for nuisance skunks may be issued to landowners who do not possess a hunting license. Go to www.dnr.sc.gov for additional information.

Shooting is effective, but will likely result in the skunk emitting odor. If odor is not a problem, use a .22-caliber rifle, or a shotgun with No. 6 shot.

Skunks may be hunted at night; however, they may not be hunted with artificial lights except when treed or cornered with dogs and no buckshot or any shot larger than #4, or any rifle ammunition larger than a twenty-two rimfire may be used. Devices that amplify light using any type of power source are considered artificial light (including night vision or thermal imaging equipment).

Trapping

In South Carolina, the legal trapping season is December 1 – March 1 for licensed trappers, however a private landowner may apply for a free depredation permit outside of the regular trapping season or if they do not have a trapping license. Permits can be obtained from any South Carolina DNR office or conservation officer.

Furbearer Trapping regulations can be obtained online at www.dnr.sc.gov.

Skunks can be captured with cage or box traps located in areas where skunks are active. Because of the potential for skunks to spray, or transmit rabies, it is best to hire a wildlife control professional to trap skunks.

Sometimes skunks must be captured directly, without the use of traps because the urgency of the situation demands immediate action. Again, contact a wildlife control professional.

Other Methods

Skunks occasionally spray structures, pets, and people. Avoid touching sprayed surfaces with bare hands. Keep animals that have been sprayed outdoors and wash them before handling. Deodorize a sprayed surface, skin, or hair by applying a mixture of ¼ cup baking soda, 1 quart of 3% hydrogen peroxide, 1 teaspoon of dish soap, and 1 gallon of water. Avoid getting the mixture in eyes. Rinse with water.

A skunk suspected of being rabid should be killed humanely, avoiding a shot to the head. Call your local health department and follow instructions for submitting the skunk for testing.

Disposition

Relocation

In South Carolina, relocation of nuisance skunks is not permitted.

Translocation

In South Carolina, translocation of nuisance skunks is not permitted.

Euthanasia

Carbon dioxide is the preferred euthanasia method for skunks. If odor is not an issue, use a .22-caliber firearm where allowed and safe. The shot usually is directed to the head, unless rabies testing is required.

Web Resources

<http://intranet.dnr.sc.gov>

<http://wildlifecontroltraining.com>

<http://icwdm.org/>

<http://wildlifecontrol.info>

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