

Managing Wildlife Damage: Striped Skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*)

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INTRODUCTION

Skunks are well known for the pungent odor emitted from their anal glands. There are four species of skunks found in North America: the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*), the spotted skunk (*Spilogale putorius*), hog-nosed skunk (*Conepatus leucontus*), and hooded skunk (*Mephitis macroura*). The striped skunk (Figure 1) is most common and found throughout most of the United States (Figure 2). Hog-nosed and hooded skunks are primarily restricted to areas of the southwest. Striped skunks are common throughout Georgia. Spotted skunks are uncommon throughout most of Georgia.

TAXONOMY

Order Carnivora – Carnivores

Family Mustelidae – Weasels, skunks, badgers, otters, wolverine

Striped Skunk – *Mephitis mephitis*

The genus (*Mephitis*) and species (*mephitis*) names are derived from a Latin word meaning “bad odor”. This, of course, refers to the defensive mechanism all skunks possess.

STATUS

Skunks are classified as game animals in Georgia by the Georgia Wildlife Resources Division. There is a trapping season from 1 December to 29 February. Trapping requires an appropriate license.

NATURAL HISTORY

Identification. Striped skunks are easily identified by their prominent white stripes along the back, jet black fur, and large bushy tail. Adult skunks can be the size of a house cat (6-14 lbs). Striped skunks often have a prominent white stripe, but can range in color from nearly all white to nearly all black. The



Figure 1. Striped skunk. (photo by Dr. Lloyd Glenn Ingles).

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Figure 2. Range map of striped skunks in North America.

stripe can be a single strip from head to tail or can be split along the back into two stripes giving the skunk the appearance of having alternating white and black bands.

Habitat. Common habitats used by striped skunks include open woodlands, clearings, and prairies. Hollowed trees or logs, small caves, and ground holes make great dens. Skunks are active year round but may become inactive during the coldest months.

Reproduction. Mating occurs in late winter. Females give birth to 4-6 young after a 63-day gestation period. Generally, the young will remain with their mother until the fall but some may stay for an entire year. Striped skunks reach sexual maturity at the age of one year and have an average lifespan of three years.

Feeding Habits. Skunks forage at night for insects, fruits, grains, or small mammals by digging and overturning woody debris such as logs.

DAMAGE ISSUES

Skunks pose little threat to people or property, but are often blamed for damage caused by other wild and domestic animals. Skunks, however, can cause damage to landscaping, agricultural crops, and poultry.

In suburban areas, skunks will readily create denning sites under houses, decks, or sheds. While foraging, skunks may uproot plants, create small holes in the lawn, and tear through unsecured garbage. This damage is similar to damage created by squirrels, raccoons, or the family dog.

Damage caused to agricultural crops has rarely been documented. Occasionally, skunks will cause noticeable damage to corn fields, eating only from the bottom of ears of corn. This damage can be confused with damage caused by deer, squirrels, raccoons, and birds (which all tend to feed more indiscriminately on the ears of corn). If the cornstalk is knocked down completely, the culprit is likely a raccoon. Beaver will cut off and carry away the stalk; bears will cause extensive damage; deer will generally eat only the ears.

Skunks are also known to eat poultry eggs; however, they will rarely attack full-sized chickens. Raccoons and weasels more commonly attack full grown birds and will usually kill several chickens in a night. Dogs will also kill and mutilate birds but rarely eat them. Birds, such as crows, will peck a single hole in the eggshell and remove the contents. Skunks rarely climb fences but may burrow under fencing.

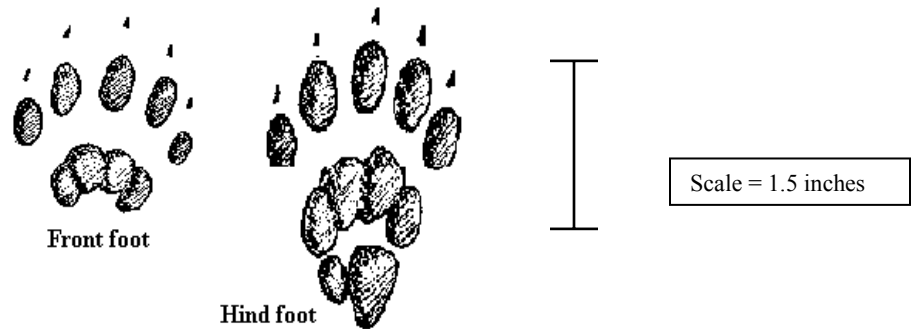


Figure 3. Front and rear skunk tracks.

It is important to discriminate damage caused by other animals from damage caused by skunks. This is best accomplished by catching the animal in the act. The presence of tracks or scats can help identify the animal involved. Skunks have five toes with large claws on their front and back feet. The rear foot measures approximately 2.5 inches long. Only the impression of the toes and claws may be visible for the front foot (Figure 3). Scats are approximately 0.25-0.50 inches long and primarily contain insect material. A good field guide will help identify tracks, scat, and other sign left by skunks.

Skunk damage to lawns will appear as small, conical holes 3 to 4 inches in diameter and 1-2 inches deep.

ECONOMICS

People often stereotype skunks as nuisance animals because of the remote chance that the animal will spray them or their pets. Skunks, however, are beneficial to landowners and help control populations of mice, rats, insects, and other pests. Economic damage can occur if skunks are digging for insects in yards or vegetable gardens. Skunks sometimes depredate beehives for bee larvae. They occasionally kill domestic poultry and eat eggs.

CONTROL

There are four categories of control techniques that can help eliminate skunk damage: habitat modification, exclusion, repulsion, and removal. Each conflict should be assessed individually to decide which management option is best for the circumstance. The time, cost, and permanence of each method should be taken into consideration. Lethal removal should be viewed as the last option.

Habitat Modification. Modifying the habitat may be a very simple way to solve a problem. Skunks typically have a home range of less than 0.5 square miles (about 320 acres). Sources of food or denning sites may attract skunks to a particular property. Mice may attract skunks, so solving a rodent problem may reduce damage from skunks. Usually, eliminating food sources and denning habitat will quickly and permanently solve a skunk problem. This can include:

- Burning or moving wood piles
- Remove any sort of shelter
- Disposing of garbage properly
- Controlling rodent populations

Frightening. Lights and sound rarely deter skunks but may provide temporary relief. However, permanent relief will require other damage control methods.

Toxicants. No toxicants are registered for use on skunks.

Fumigants. Aluminum phosphide gas cartridges are registered for fumigating skunks in their burrows but regulations vary by state. Follow label directions.

Repellents. Currently no repellents are registered for use on skunks. Skunks may be repelled by the scent of moth balls or ammonia-soaked rags. These methods should only be used outdoors and with adequate ventilation.

Fencing. When a skunk takes shelter in and under sheds, houses, and garages the quickest solution to this problem is to prevent the skunk from accessing these places. Be sure to:

- Repair holes or gaps in foundations
- Entrances to garages or sheds should be secured with a tight fitting door that remains closed when not in use.
- Fence in yards and bury fences so that skunks cannot dig under them. Skunks can not climb well.

When using exclusion fencing be sure not to trap young animals inside the structure. To be sure young skunks have left the area, sprinkle ordinary baking flour around the entrance. After dark, examine the flour for footprints to confirm that the animal has left the den. Seal the entrance but open the entrance for about one hour the next day to allow other animals to exit the den in case more than one individual was present.

Trapping. Skunks can easily be captured in live traps and foot-hold traps. Live traps specifically designed for skunks, which protect the trapper from being sprayed (Figure 4). These traps are usually enclosed in a plastic cover. Wooden box traps work much the same way. Multiple traps should be set

near the den site for multiple nights to ensure that all skunks are captured. The traps can be baited with canned cat food, peanut butter, chicken, or fish scraps.



Figure 4. A spray proof skunk trap

Captured skunks should be killed or relocated. The USDA recommends euthanizing captured skunks with carbon monoxide gas; however, this method is not recommended for homeowners and should only be used by licensed wildlife control operators. If the skunk is to be relocated be sure to move it at least 10 miles from the trap site. Also, be sure to release the skunk in an area where the animal will not disturb other people. In some states, relocating wildlife without a permit may be illegal. Always check with the local wildlife agency in your state.

Shooting. Shooting a trapped skunk is not recommended because the skunk will almost always discharge scent. Shooting may also be illegal in suburban areas.

DISCUSSION

A common recipe for removing skunk scent from pets is a mixture of one quart of 3% hydrogen peroxide, $\frac{1}{4}$ cup of baking soda, and one teaspoon of liquid detergent. Wash the pet in this solution and after five minutes rinse thoroughly. Use immediately and do not store in a closed container or the container may burst (<http://www.humboldt.edu/~wfw2/deodorize.shtml>). Tomato juice as a home remedy to remove odor is not considered effective. Neutroleum alpha is a scent-masking chemical that may be available from cleaning supply companies and used to mask the skunk odor. If you or your pet are sprayed in the eyes by a skunk, temporary blindness can result. Rinse eyes repeatedly with clean water and seek immediate medical care.

Despite an occasional unpleasant encounter, skunks generally benefit farmers and homeowners, by consuming harmful insect pests and rodents such as mice, grubs and other insects.

ILLUSTRATION ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Figure 1: <http://bss.sfsu.edu/holzman/lakemerced/mammals.htm>

Figure 2:

http://www.discoverlife.org/nh/tx/Vertebrata/Mammalia/Mephitidae/Mephitis/mephitis/images/Mephitis_mephitis_map.320.jpg.html

Figure 3: <http://www.humboldt.net/~tracker/spskunk.html>

Figure 4: <http://www.koendersmfg.com/images/skunktrap.jpg>

OTHER RESOURCES

Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management

<http://icwdm.org/handbook/carnivor/Skunks.asp>

<http://icwdm.org/wildlife/skunk/skunks.asp>

Texas Cooperative Extension: Wildlife Damage Management

<http://www.entm.purdue.edu/Wildlife/Controlling%20Skunk%20Damage.pdf>

Animal Damage Control & Wildlife Management Services

<http://www.wildlifedamage.com/skunks.htm>

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