

Skunks

Skunks can be highly beneficial to farmers, gardeners and landowners because they feed on large numbers of agricultural and garden pests. Insects such as cutworms and beetle grubs are eaten in large quantities by skunks.



Occasionally, skunks take up residence in small town or suburban areas where choice den sites associated with ready food and water supplies are found. In most cases, problems caused by the presence of skunks are outweighed by their beneficial habits. As with most wild animals, if they are not molested, they will cause no harm. Unless skunks become really bothersome, they should be left alone.

Identification. The skunk is a member of the weasel family (Mustelidae). The striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) is the most common skunk in Yavapai County. It is characterized by prominent, lateral stripes of white down the back in a coat of jet black fur. The body (up to 20 inches and 8 pounds) is about the size of an ordinary housecat. The skunk has short, stocky legs and proportionately large front feet equipped with well-developed claws for digging.

The spotted skunk (*Spilogale putorium*) (up to 21 inches long) is smaller and more weasel-like and is readily distinguishable by white spots and short, broken white stripes in a dense jet-black coat.

The hog-nosed skunk (*Conepatus leuconotus*) has a long snout that is hairless for about one inch on top. The entire back and tail are white and the lower sides and belly are black.

Habitat. The habitat of the skunk is usually clearings, pastures, and open lands bordering forests. Its home is usually a den under a building, large boulder, and in a structures like a road culvert or old junk pile. It is nocturnal in habit, usually slow moving and deliberate, and likes to feed under yard lights where bugs are attracted. Skunks have great confidence in defending themselves against any and all animals.

Food habits. Skunks are considered to be predators, but will eat plant and animal foods in about equal amounts during fall and winter. They eat considerably more animal

matter during spring and summer, however, when insects, especially grasshoppers, beetles and crickets, are more available. Mice are regular items in the skunk diet in winter. Rats, cottontails and small mammals are taken when other food is scarce. Skunks are often attracted by pet food left outdoors and human garbage containing food.

Life history and behavior. The breeding season of skunks begins late in February when adult females mate. The gestation period varies from 7 to 10 weeks. Litters are born from May to early June. There is usually only one litter annually, usually with 4 to 6 young. The young stay with the female until fall.

The normal home range of the skunk is 1/2 to 1 1/2 miles in diameter. During the breeding season, a male may travel 4 or 5 miles per night. Skunks become somewhat dormant for a period of about a month during the coldest part of the winter.

Skunks are normally mild-tempered animals which will not become aggressive unless they are cornered or harmed. Warnings are usually given before discharging their scent by rapidly stamping their forefeet and arching their tails over their backs. A slow, quiet retreat is recommended. Loud noises and quick, aggressive actions should be avoided.

How to live with skunks in your yard: Skunks are widely distributed and have been very successful in adjusting to life near man and his concentrated food supplies and den sites. To avoid problems,

- (1) Minimize den sites in your yard. Preventive measures should be taken to keep skunks from denning under buildings by sealing off all foundation openings. They may burrow under porches or buildings by entering these openings. Cover all openings with wire mesh, sheet metal, or concrete. Remove unused outbuildings, junk piles, and other den sites. The immediate backyard should be fenced in areas where skunks are frequently observed.
- (2) Restrict access to food sources. Garbage, refuse or pet food left outdoors acts as an attractant to skunks. Garden fruits and vegetables are another food source, as are mice which may be found in storage areas. Skunks may be attracted to areas

where insects are concentrated due to street and yard lights at night. Skunks dig holes in lawns, golf courses and gardens to search for insect grubs found beneath the ground surface. Digging normally appears as small, 2- to 4-inch cone-shaped holes or patches of upturned earth.

(3) Human activities and noise generally cause displacement of skunks, especially when they first come into contact with man. Some dogs will alert you to the presence of skunks. Dogs are also a prime source for transmitting rabies to people from a diseased skunk or other dog or cat.

When you can't "live with them" in your yard: The rabies disease is carried by skunks on occasion. This disease frequently causes a change in behavior. Caution should be taken to avoid overly-aggressive skunks which may approach without hesitation. Any skunk showing abnormal behavior, such as daytime activity and aggressive behavior, may be rabid and should be treated cautiously. Contact the Arizona Game and Fish officer in your area immediately (listed under state agencies in the telephone directory).

When you can't tolerate the presence of a skunk: If you provide good skunk habitat, such as den sites, food supply, and a relatively low human disturbance level, you will always have skunks. Shooting or trapping the animals will only solve your problem when used in conjunction with the removal of food and den sites as other skunks will likely move in to replace the missing skunk. It is also illegal to discharge a firearm within the city or town limits. There are three choices: (1) modify the habitat to make it uninviting to skunks; (2) move to where skunks don't live; or (3) adjust your attitude toward the wildlife in your yard.

When a skunk in the wrong place is the problem: If skunks are denning under your house or front porch, they need to be trapped and moved. Either trap them yourself or call a professional. Yavapai County Animal Control does **not** trap skunks for homeowners. Skunks can be caught in live traps set near the entrance to their den. They are frequently taken in traps using canned, fish-flavored cat food as bait. Other good baits are a small piece of bread coated with peanut butter, sardines and bacon or chicken. A canvas tarp should be used to cover the trap before setting it to reduce the chances of the skunk discharging its scent. Skunks can also be caught in a large (30+ gallon) trash can by burying it in the ground or placing it at the end of a porch or in a vertical position where a skunk can climb into it to retrieve the

bait at the bottom of the container. Skunks do not jump very well and will often go to sleep in the bottom of the barrel. The lid can be carefully placed over the top and the skunk can be transported in the container.

Continue trapping several days past the last successful catch. A person should approach a trap slowly and quietly without upsetting a trapped skunk and gently remove the trap. Arizona Game and Fish Department licensed Wildlife Service permittees or the homeowner may trap and relocate skunks, but the homeowner must contact the Arizona Game and Fish Department for authorization and a recommended release site before transporting the animal. Before deciding to transport a skunk, consider the ability of the trapped animal to survive in a "new" habitat. If the area is good skunk habitat, it is probably inhabited by resident skunks, and any "newcomer" could have a tough time finding a niche.

Take preventive measures to keep skunks from re-entering the den site by sealing all access holes. Skunks may be excluded by using 1/4 inch screening or solid metal flashing.

The use of chemicals has proven ineffective for displacing skunks in and around residences. There are no registered repellents for skunks. There are no toxicants or fumigants registered for use in controlling skunks. As with other species of mammals, moth balls or moth flakes (paradichlorobenzene or naphthalene) sometimes discourage skunks. Ammonia-soaked cloths may act as a repellent for a short time. A light bulb placed in the den will also tend to discourage them. Loud noises and human activity may also discourage skunks

Odors. The odor caused by thiols can be reduced with the following formula. Mix together 1 quart of 3% hydrogen peroxide, 1/4 cup baking soda, and 1 teaspoon liquid soap. Apply while the solution is bubbling and rinse with tap water. Diluted solutions of vinegar or tomato juice also have been used to eliminate most of the odor from pets, people, or clothing. Clothing may be soaked in a weak solution of household chloride bleach or ammonia. Neutroleum alpha, a scent masking solution, can sometimes be obtained from commercial cleaning suppliers.

Where musk has entered the eyes, severe burning and an excessive tear flow occur. **Temporary** blindness may result with sight returning in 10 to 15 minutes. Rinsing the eyes with water will speed recovery. Contact your physician if pain persists.

Updated August 1, 2007
<http://cals.arizona.edu/yavapai>

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