

Welcome to the Skunk Habitat



Skunk Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Family: Mephitidae

Genus: *Mephitis*

Species: *mephitis*



Who Are Skunks?

Striped skunks are the black and white, bushy-tailed animals that are widely known for the foul-smelling musk they spray to ward off enemies. These animals are related to the mink and weasel, but are not as sleek and agile as their relatives. There are 11 different species of skunks in all, with striped skunks being the most common species found in North America. Skunks are mammals that belong to the Carnivora order and share the Mephitidae family with stink badgers. Mephitidae means stench or foul-smell in Latin. The striped skunk can be classified in the *Mephitis* genus, which also includes the spotted skunk, and its genus name also means bad odor. Striped skunks, in particular, are scientifically known as part of the *M. mephitis* species.

What Do They Look Like?

The size of a striped skunk is comparable to the size of a domesticated house cat, standing eight to ten inches tall and measuring up to 32 inches long from head to tail. The average weight of a striped skunk is between six and eight pounds; the males weigh anywhere from three to eleven pounds and the females weigh about two to eight pounds. While males are generally larger in size, females usually have a longer tail. A skunk has a small head, small ears, a rounded body, short legs, and a long, bushy tail. Striped skunks are covered in a thick black fur, with a white stripe that extends from the nose, splits into two stripes down the back, and ends at the base of the tail. At one time, skunks were very valuable in the fur industry for their thick, glossy fur.

What Are Their Senses Like?

Skunks are timid, non-aggressive animals that will not spray unless they have been provoked. As crepuscular creatures that mostly come out at dusk and dawn, having good hearing and a keen sense of smell is vital. They use these senses to detect predators and they also rely on their enhanced sense of smell to find food.

Contrasting these strong senses, skunks have poor eyesight and they are only able to see two or three feet in front of them. Skunks have 34 teeth, including four pointy canine teeth, which allow them to devour a variety of invertebrates and vertebrates.



What Kind of Tracks Do They Make?

The skunk has four padded feet, each with five partially webbed toes that end with long, sharp claws. The long claws that striped skunks have are longer on the forefeet and more curved on the hind feet, giving them the ability to dig their homes and forage for food. This characteristic can be seen in skunk tracks because the claw marks are farther ahead of toe marks in the front tracks and closer to the toe marks in the rear tracks.

What Is Their Place in Nature?

Striped skunks are considered to be on the “Least Concern” section of the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. While skunk population is very stable, the population densities of this animal vary widely. There may be anywhere from two to fifty skunks per square mile in the geographic regions where striped skunks are found.



What Do They Eat?

Striped skunks are omnivores, which are animals that eat both plants and other animals. A skunk’s diet mostly consists of insects, such as beetles and grasshoppers. When the number of insects is limited, skunks will also consume mice, rats, bird eggs, turtle eggs, earthworms, frogs, crayfish, fruits, berries, grain crops, and even garbage. In particular, the skunk will feed on mice, rats, bird eggs, turtle eggs, earthworms, frogs, crayfish, fruits, berries, and grain crops. Although most humans view skunks as a

nuisance, they serve the beneficial purpose of controlling the mice and insect populations, both animals that destroy crops.

How Do Skunks Protect Themselves From Predators?

Because of its stature and flat-footedness, the skunk moves slowly, usually waddling as it travels from place to place. Skunks are unable to outrun their predators, reaching only ten miles per hour at their fastest speed. Because of their lack of speed, skunks do not try and outrun their attackers; instead, they rely on their rancid spray for protection. When a skunk feels threatened, it showers its enemy with musk, a yellow, oily liquid. This awful-smelling spray is released from its two anal scent glands, located under the tail.

Although the musk is not permanently harmful, it is very hard to remove and it causes extreme discomfort, gagging, nausea, and (sometimes) temporary vision loss. The skunk's spray is also very hard to remove and may take several days to be completely gone.

Before a skunk sprays an animal it feels threatened by, it displays several warning signs. The tail becomes raised and bristled and the skunk arches its back. If the enemy still does not



back down, the skunk will stamp its feet on the ground and then finally will spray its hunter. Using muscles near the anal gland, the skunk can control the direction of the mist, which can reach between 10 and 15 feet away. The foul odor from the musk can reach up to a mile away! With a tablespoon amount of this liquid, the skunk is able to spray six times before it runs out. Then it must replenish its supply, which takes about ten days.

After being sprayed, the predator will either flee or will be hindered long enough from the effects of the stench that the skunk is able to escape. For this reason, spraying its enemies proves to be a very effective defense mechanism.

What Dangers Do Skunks Face?

Skunks only have one main predator, the Great Horned Owl. The owl swoops down from above the skunk so quickly that the skunk cannot detect its presence. Also, the Great Horned Owl has a poor sense of smell, which serves as an advantage because if the skunk were to spray, the owl would not be affected by the odor and would eat the skunk anyways. In contrast, animals such as foxes, wolves, bobcats, and other animals that may attempt to prey on the skunks are likely to retreat after suffering from the horrible stench.

Humans are responsible for about half of skunks' deaths each year. Spraying dogs, digging holes, and creating their homes under houses and porches cause skunks to be seen as a nuisance. When skunks take part in these activities, wildlife control will resort to eliminating the skunks that are causing problems. Also, skunks have trouble seeing cars coming, due to their poor eyesight, which makes them easy targets for automobiles. Disease poses an additional danger for skunks, particularly rabies. Skunks are among the highest carriers of rabies.

Where Do Skunks Live?

Striped skunks are native to North America, and can be found in Northern Mexico, throughout the United States, and as far north as Central Canada. Other species of skunks, such as the spotted skunk and the hog-nosed skunk, can be found further south, ranging from Canada to Central and South America. Stink badgers, which resemble the hog-nosed skunk, are strictly found in the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia. The striped skunk can be found throughout Florida, except for in the Keys.

What Is Their Habitat in the Wild Like?

Striped skunks show little discrimination when it comes to finding a place to live and can be found in both rural and urban areas, as long as a water source is within two miles. Skunks usually do not venture out farther than two miles from their homes, and usually stay in a range between half a mile and one and a half miles from their dens. These animals also require an ample supply of food and cover. Skunks easily adapt to many different habitats such as woods, grasslands, brush, open prairies, and developed areas.



Skunks will either use their long claws to dig a den or they will reside in an abandoned den built by another animal, such as a fox or a woodchuck. Other aboveground places a skunk will call home are hollow logs, woodpiles, or in brushes. It is also common for skunks to build their homes underneath porches, houses, garages, and buildings, as they have a high tolerance for humans. A skunk will use grass, leaves, and sometimes hay to line its home when it lives in a den. A skunk's burrow often contains one to three chambers, or rooms, and there may be up to five entrances, each about eight inches in diameter.

Where Do They Live?

How Do Skunk Families Live?

Striped skunks are usually solitary animals, meaning that they live alone. Skunks only interact with each other during winter, when they are mating, or when a mother is taking care of her new babies. Adult skunks are generally quiet animals, but young skunks tend to be more playful and make more noises. The skunk's biggest form of communication is stamping its feet, which indicates that it is upset. Other noises a skunk will make are hisses, growls, screeches, grunts, squeals, and the clicking of its teeth.

What Is Their Life Cycle?

Skunks are polygamous animals that breed in late winter, usually in February and March. On average, the female will carry the babies for about 60 to 75 days before giving birth to a litter of four to six baby skunks, known as kits. The mother skunk raises her babies alone for about eight months before they are ready to go off on their own. Male skunks do not stay to help raise the kits, and some have even been known to kill their own young.

Skunk Habitat

When striped skunks are born, they are mostly pink with faint black and white traces and very little to no fur. The baby skunks are completely blind and do not open their eyes until they are three weeks old. The kits produce musk when they are only eight days old, but they are unable to spray intruders until they reach about three weeks old. They will leave the den and venture out with their mother for the first time when they are between six and eight weeks old. Striped skunks reach sexual maturity at a year old, and it is at this age that they are finally ready to leave their mother. Skunks generally live to be two or three years old in the wild, but they may live up to ten years in captivity.

How Do Striped Skunks Spend Their Time?

Skunks are nocturnal animals, meaning they are active from dusk to dawn. After sleeping the days away in its den, a skunk spends its nights searching for food. If a skunk is seen during the day, it is usually assumed that it has rabies, but mother skunks will search for food for their babies in the



daylight if it is absolutely necessary. If a skunk does have rabies, some common signs include aggressive behavior, drooling, paralysis, stumbling, and little to no effort of concealing itself.

When winter comes, six or seven females will share a den together. Generally males spend the winters alone, but they may board with the females. Although skunks are not true hibernators, they spend much of their time sleeping during the winter. During his temporary hibernation, commonly known as a state of torpor, skunks' body temperature lowers and their breathing rate and metabolism slow down

drastically. Animals in torpor are able to wake much more easily than those in hibernation, so the skunks may wake up every few weeks or after a month or two, rather than sleeping through the whole winter. Skunks drift in and out of this deep sleep for about a 100 day period, relying on body fat and sharing body heat with the others to stay warm. If a skunk wakes up on a warmer day, it may decide to search for food before returning to its state of torpor. When the winter is over, mating season begins and skunks begin living normally once again.

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