How to Handle Problem Skunks

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There are two species of skunks in Kansas. The striped skunk is about the size of a large house cat, generally black in color with two white stripes running from the base of the skull to the large bushy tail. Solid black individuals are known to occur, but only rarely. The spotted skunk is a smaller mammal about the size of a half-grown house cat. The spotted skunk is a more active, agile animal and a good tree climber.

The striped skunk is most often found close to old buildings, stream banks or in relatively level country. It is genera-ly more tolerant of humans and is more abundant than the spotted skunk. In rural areas the striped skunk will frequently den beneath barns and sheds and its daily range of about one-half to one mile is less than that of the spotted skunk. The spotted skunk prefers a hillside habitat, more brushy than wooded dry and somewhat rocky. When found in buildings, it prefers those that are intermittently occupied, such as summer cabins.

Skunks are the least popular of all our wild animals because of the disagreeable scent which they discharge when provoked. Yet they are very beneficial, as over 1,600 stomach analyses indicate. Nearly half of their natural diet is insects, one-fifth fruit, and one-fifth mice. They are particularly destructive of potato beetles, grasshoppers, white grubs, and the eggs of turtles which destroy ducks. They are active at night during the fall and spring. It is at this time that many are killed by automobiles.

The skunk is active all year. It may sleep for several days during very cold weather, but does not hibernate. Mating occurs from January to May. The gestation period is 62 days. Skunks give birth to 4 to 10 naked, blind, young, usually in May. The babies' eyes will open in about 3 weeks, and they will nurse for 6 to 7 weeks. Only 1 litter a year is raised. Adults weigh about 8 to 10 pounds; females are usually somewhat smaller. They will mate the first spring.

When a skunk stamps the ground with its forefeet and raises its tail, it is a warning. Ordinarily, there is no discharge, but if it believes it is in danger, one discharge will not empty the reservoir. An effective method to neutralize the odor is to wash everything with ammonia water. Ammonia water can also be sprayed in the room and is effective in clearing the air.

Skunks normally use an underground den to which they retire during daylight hours. Most frequently, skunk dens are simply enlargements of burrows made and abandoned by smaller animals. Other favored den sites are rock piles, wood piles, hillsides, roadside ditches, and hay stacks. Skunks occasionally occupy enclosed spaces between double floors, between walls, under sink cabinets in cabins and homes, or in barns where faulty construction affords them access. In loose, sandy soil, skunks will excavate their own den burrows.

Dens are seldom occupied by single individuals; most are used by a female and her current brood. It is not unusual for several adult females to occupy a den with a single male. During cold weather as many as a dozen adults may sleep intermittently for several weeks in a single den. Occasionally a skunk den is occupied by a solitary older male.

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Many striped skunks are killed on the highways of Kansas, and the numbers so killed are probably proportionately greater than the numbers of skunks in the vicinity. The normal defense of skunks is to stop when approached, raise their tails, and prepare to emit their scent. Although such a behavioral pattern may have a survival value against a predator, such as a coyote or man, it is fatal when used toward an oncoming vehicle.

A high nuisance value attributed to skunks is their habit of burrowing in lawns and on glaf courses in search of beetle larvae and other insects which constitute a significant portion of their diet. In many instances these skunk activities are charged to moles or gophers and the resulting misdirected control efforts are, of course, fruitless.

Severe depredation can at times be attributed to skunks due to their omnivorous feeding habits. Un protected hen houses or "loose flocks" of barnyard checkens are a favorite target of skunks in search of food. Eggs and very young birds are highly favored food items. In wildlands these items also are a portion of the diet though not so frequently available as in rural-urban situations. Vegetable items (berries, green corn and grapes) are sought in agricultural areas. Frequently, skunks are attracted to semi-urban premises by householders who feed pets in back or side yards and use excessive amounts of food. Severe economic damage has been done by skunks that destroy beehives in private or commercial apiaries where often one will tear a hive apart in its efforts to get at immature bees.

Rabies is caused by a virus affecting the central nervous system and occurring in the saliva of the infected animal. The disease is transmitted from animal to animal through the contamination of bite or wound with the saliva.

Rabies has been reported from a great variety of warm-blooded animals, which include the following wild species: skunk, fox, insectivorous bats, rat, mouse, squirrel, woodchuck, gopher, rabbit, antelope, deer, coyote, hawks, and owls. Man and his domestic animals may also become infected, especially dogs.

The number of cases of rabies in dogs has been decreasing while the number of cases of rabies in skunks has been increasing in Kansas. Encouragement for pet owners to get their animals vaccinated has been the major cause for the declining number of cases of rabies among domestic animals.

While populations of wild animals normally increase and decrease, rabies is normally associated within high population of a species of animals. When man attempts to control the population densities of wild native animals he often causes a disruption in the normal population densities of other wild native animals. For instance, coyotes are natural enemies of skunks. In fact the wise coyote trapper knows that dead skunk is a good bait for luring a coyote into a trap. When man puts pressure on to kill coyotes, then this leaves more room for animals such as skunks to increase. Skunks and fox seem to be importnat "carriers" of rabies. These are two animals that increase when coyote populations decrease.

When a case of rabies has been confirmed in a wild animal, this kind of wild animal is usually abundant since rabies is a disease used by nature in reducing a high population of animals. Man automatically starts seeking ways to "control" or lower the population of this particular wild animal. The natural system of nature is already at work. The disease is fatal and of short duration. History has shown that the high occurrence of rabies quickly dies out. In many cases man can pro-ong the high rate of rabies by trying to control an animal population while risking further human exposure. In addition control programs are expensive, time consuming and many kinds of non-target animals are often affected by the control methods.

So far man does not possess enough knowledge about rabies to eliminate the virus. Right now we think that certain individual species of animals will support rabies indefinitely. Authorities now believe that the rabies virus may remain inactive in skunks

until some form of stress brings about reactivation of latent rabies. There seems to be a difference in the presence of rabies among the sexes of skunks at different times of the year and this again related to environmental stresses upon either the female or males.

Everyone should realize that animals may be afflicted with rabies. Young children should be warned not to pick up "friendly" wild animals, especially skunks, which seem to have no fear of man. Even young wild animals can pass the disease to humans. The behavior of rabid skunks differs markedly from that of nonrabid skunks. The rabid skunk exhibits little or no fear of man or other animals, abandons its normal nocturnal habits, exhibits a greater awareness and at times becomes aggressive rather than retiring. General failure of the autonomic nervous system finally results in death. Any skunk exhibiting any one or combination of these symptoms should be a matter of serious concern and the observer should immediately notify local or state public health departments or a doctor of veterinary medicine. However, normal skunks may be observed occasionally in daytime. An individual traveling unconcernedly along a river bottom even at midday, or a female on an evening or early morning prowl with its brood of young, need not be a source of alarm. But a skunk defiant of humans at midday is a highly suspect animal, as are those that invade homes or attach livestock or pets.

If it is necessary to kill a suspect animal, take care to prevent serious damage to the head as would happen if it were shot in this body area. A sharp blow at the base of the skull or across the spine with a substantial stick is sufficient to kill without making the brain useless for diagnostic purposes. It is desirable to refrigerate the head, but do not freeze it.

Positive rabies diagnosis is accomplished by examining brain tissue microscopically for specific pathological changes called Negri (after their discoverer) bodies. Unless the disease is allowed to run its course or into the late stages, the Negri bodies may not be sufficiently numerous to be observed. In this case, confirmation may be obtained by inoculating the brains of mice with brain material from the suspect animal. Suspect animals are submitted to the laboratory because of biting someone, abnormal behavior or being found freshly dead of undeterminable cause.

Control is best achieved by removal and relocation, exclusion, or destruction in that order. Removal and relocation is a desirable measure since it preserves the inherent value of the animal in a situation where it can continue its part in the environment. To a very limited extent, skunks are considered of value to the fur market when skins are prime. In most cases, wanton destruction is unwarranted and not desirable.

The urban householder faced with the problem of joint tenancy with either species of skunk would be well advised to call the local licensed commercial pest control operator.

Removal and relocation with individuals or families of skunks is best accomplished with live traps. Other traps that kill or maim may result in serious odor problems. Box or live traps should be baited with a chicken head, dead mouse, or a portion of canned pet food with a meat or fish base, canned or fresh raw fish, bacon, chicken parts, or whole eggs. Skunks are relatively easy to trap and providing the trap is handled with a minimum of jarring or shaking, can be transported to a remote area and released with little concern for possible musk discharge.

On the rare occasion when the skunk proves to be unmanageable, the trap can be covered with a tarp. Carbon monoxide from a vehicle exhaust can be piped to the covered trap (also, chloroform or ether could be used) to subdue or even kill it, or the trap can be immersed in water to destroy the animal.

Properly-constructed foundations will prevent skunks from denning beneath buildings. In lieu of continuous foundations, screening with quarter-inch hardware cloth is effective. Prevent return of skunks to crawl spaces by closing all exits but one. Then place an L-shaped piece of hardware cloth over the exit. The wire needs to be big enough to overlap both sides of the vent. Its short leg should be about 8 inches long and parallel to

but just clear of the ground. Hang the wire loosely from its top so the skunks will push it up to leave but cannot re-enter because they will be standing on the short leg of the wire screening.

Paracichlorobenzene or naphthalene crystals, one pound per burrow or 5 to 10 pounds per average crawl area or attic. Paracichlorobenzene is widely used or recommended but not registered by EPA for this specific purpose of repelling skunks.