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SKUNKS

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SKUNKS



Fig. 1. Left, the striped skunk, *Mephitis mephitis*; right, the spotted skunk, *Spilogale putorius*

Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Exclusion

Buildings: close cellar and outside basement and crawl space doors; seal and cover all openings including window wells and pits.

Poultry yards: install wire mesh fences.

Beehives: elevate and install aluminum guards.

Habitat Modification

Removal of garbage, debris, and lumber piles.

Frightening

Lights and sounds are of limited value.

Repellents

Some home remedies such as moth balls or flakes or ammonia solution may be useful, but no repellents are registered.

Toxicants

None are registered.

Fumigants

Gas cartridges.

Trapping

Box trap.

Leghold trap.

Shooting

Practical only when animals are far from residential areas.

Other Methods

Skunk removal.

Odor removal.

Identification

The skunk, a member of the weasel family, is represented by four species in North America. The skunk has short, stocky legs and proportionately large feet equipped with well-developed claws that enable it to be very adept at digging.

The striped skunk (Fig. 1) is characterized by prominent, lateral white stripes that run down its back. Its fur is otherwise jet black. Striped skunks are the most abundant of the four species. The body of the striped skunk is about the size of an ordinary house cat (up to 29 inches [74 cm] long and weighing about 8 pounds [3.6 kg]). The spotted skunk (Fig. 1) is smaller (up to 21 inches [54 cm] long and weighing about 2.2 pounds [1 kg]), more weasel-like, and is readily distinguishable by white spots and short, broken white stripes in a dense jet-black coat.



PREVENTION AND CONTROL OF WILDLIFE DAMAGE — 1994

Cooperative Extension Division
Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources
University of Nebraska - Lincoln

United States Department of Agriculture
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Animal Damage Control

Great Plains Agricultural Council
Wildlife Committee

The hooded skunk (*Mephitis macroura*) is identified by hair on the neck that is spread out into a ruff. It is 28 inches (71 cm) long and weighs the same as the striped skunk. It has an extremely long tail, as long as the head and body combined. The back and tail may be all white, or nearly all black, with two white side stripes. The hog-nosed skunk (*Conepatus leucontus*) has a long snout that is hairless for about 1 inch (2.5 cm) at the top. It is 26 inches (66 cm) long and weighs 4 pounds (1.8 kg). Its entire back and tail are white and the lower sides and belly are black. Skunks have the ability to discharge nauseating musk from the anal glands and are capable of several discharges, not just one.

Range

The striped skunk is common throughout the United States and Canada (Fig. 2a). Spotted skunks are uncommon in some areas, but distributed throughout most of the United States and northern Mexico (Fig 2b). The hooded skunk and the hog-nosed skunk are much less common than striped and spotted skunks. Hooded skunks are limited to southwestern New Mexico and western Texas. The hog-nosed skunk is found in southern Colorado, central and southern New Mexico, the southern half of Texas, and northern Mexico.

General Biology, Reproduction, and Behavior

Adult skunks begin breeding in late February. Yearling females (born in the preceding year) mate in late March. Gestation usually lasts 7 to 10 weeks. Older females bear young during the first part of May, while yearling females bear young in early June. There is usually only 1 litter annually. Litters commonly consist of 4 to 6 young, but may have from 2 to 16. Younger or smaller females have smaller litters than older or larger



Fig. 2a. Range of the striped skunk in North America.



Fig. 2b. Range of the spotted skunk in North America.

females. The young stay with the female until fall. Both sexes mature by the following spring. The age potential for a skunk is about 10 years, but few live beyond 3 years in the wild.

The normal home range of the skunk is 1/2 to 2 miles (2 to 5 km) in diameter. During the breeding season, a male may travel 4 to 5 miles (6.4 to 8 km) each night.

Skunks are dormant for about a month during the coldest part of winter. They may den together in winter for warmth, but generally are not sociable. They are nocturnal in habit, rather slow-moving and deliberate, and have great confidence in defending themselves against other animals.

Habitat

Skunks inhabit clearings, pastures, and open lands bordering forests. On prairies, skunks seek cover in the thickets and timber fringes along streams. They establish dens in hollow logs or may climb trees and use hollow limbs.

Food Habits

Skunks eat plant and animal foods in about equal amounts during fall and winter. They eat considerably more animal matter during spring and summer when insects, their preferred food, are more available. Grasshoppers, beetles, and crickets are the adult insects most often taken. Field and house mice are regular and important items in the skunk diet, particularly in winter. Rats, cottontail rabbits, and other small mammals are taken when other food is scarce.

Damage and Damage Identification

Skunks become a nuisance when their burrowing and feeding habits conflict with humans. They may burrow under porches or buildings by entering foundation openings. Garbage or refuse left outdoors may be disturbed by skunks. Skunks may damage beehives by attempting to feed on bees. Occasionally, they feed on corn, eating only the lower ears. If the cornstalk is knocked over, however, raccoons are more likely the cause of damage. Damage to the upper ears of corn is indicative of birds, deer, or squirrels. Skunks dig holes in lawns, golf courses, and gardens to search for insect grubs found in the soil. Digging normally appears as small, 3- to 4-inch (7- to 10-cm) cone-shaped holes or patches of up-turned earth. Several other animals, including domestic dogs, also dig in lawns.

Skunks occasionally kill poultry and eat eggs. They normally do not climb fences to get to poultry. By contrast,

rats, weasels, mink, and raccoons regularly climb fences. If skunks gain access, they will normally feed on the eggs and occasionally kill one or two 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 will often severely mutilate poultry. Tracks may be used to identify the animal causing damage. Both the hind and forefeet of skunks have five toes. In some cases, the fifth toe may not be obvious. Claw marks are usually visible, but the heels of the forefeet normally are not. The hindfeet tracks are approximately 2 1/2 inches long (6.3 cm) (Fig. 3). Skunk droppings can often be identified by the undigested insect parts they contain. Droppings are 1/4 to 1/2 inch (6 to 13 mm) in diameter and 1 to 2 inches (2.5 to 5 cm) long.

Odor is not always a reliable indicator of the presence or absence of skunks. Sometimes dogs, cats, or other animals that have been sprayed by skunks move under houses and make owners mistakenly think skunks are present.

Rabies may be carried by skunks on occasion. Skunks are the primary carriers of rabies in the Midwest. When rabies outbreaks occur, the ease with which rabid animals can be contacted increases. Therefore, rabid skunks are prime vectors for the spread of the virus. Avoid overly aggressive skunks that approach without hesitation. Any skunk showing abnormal behavior, such as daytime activity, may be rabid and should be treated with caution. Report suspicious behavior to local animal control authorities.

Legal Status

Striped skunks are not protected by law in most states, but the spotted skunk is fully protected in some. Legal status and licensing requirements vary. Check with state wildlife officials before removing any skunks.

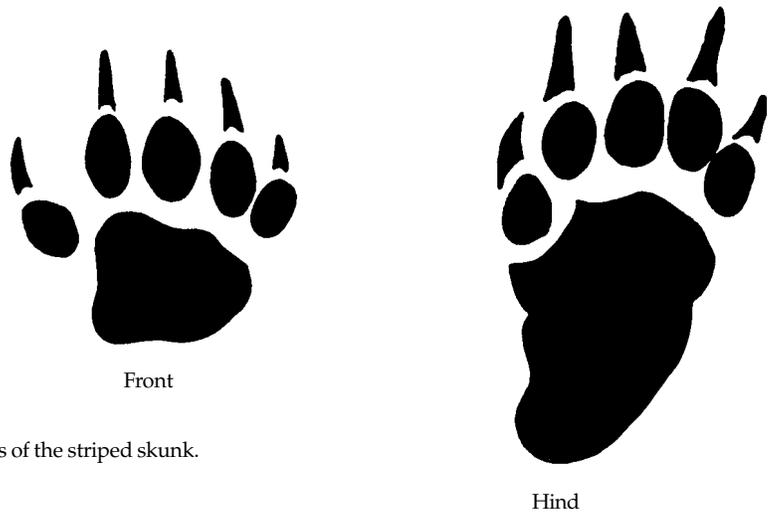


Fig. 3. Tracks of the striped skunk.

Damage Prevention and Control Methods

Exclusion

Keep skunks from denning under buildings by sealing off all foundation openings. Cover all openings with wire mesh, sheet metal, or concrete. Bury fencing 1 1/2 to 2 feet (0.4 to 0.6 m) where skunks can gain access by digging. Seal all ground-level openings into poultry buildings and close doors at night. Poultry yards and coops without subsurface foundations may be fenced with 3-foot (1-m) wire mesh fencing. Bury the lowest foot (0.3 m) of fencing with the bottom 6 inches (15.2 cm) bent outward from the yard or building. Skunks can be excluded from window wells or similar pits with mesh fencing. Place beehives on stands 3 feet (1 m) high. It may be necessary to install aluminum guards around the bases of hives if skunks attempt to climb the supports. Skunks, however, normally do not climb. Use tight-fitting lids to keep skunks out of garbage cans.

Habitat Modification

Properly dispose of garbage or other food sources that will attract skunks. Skunks are often attracted to rodents living in barns, crawl spaces, sheds, and garages. Rodent control programs may be necessary to eliminate this attraction.

Debris such as lumber, fence posts, and junk cars provide shelter for skunks, and may encourage them to use an area. Clean up the area to discourage skunks.

Frightening

Lights and sounds may provide temporary relief from skunk activity.

Repellents

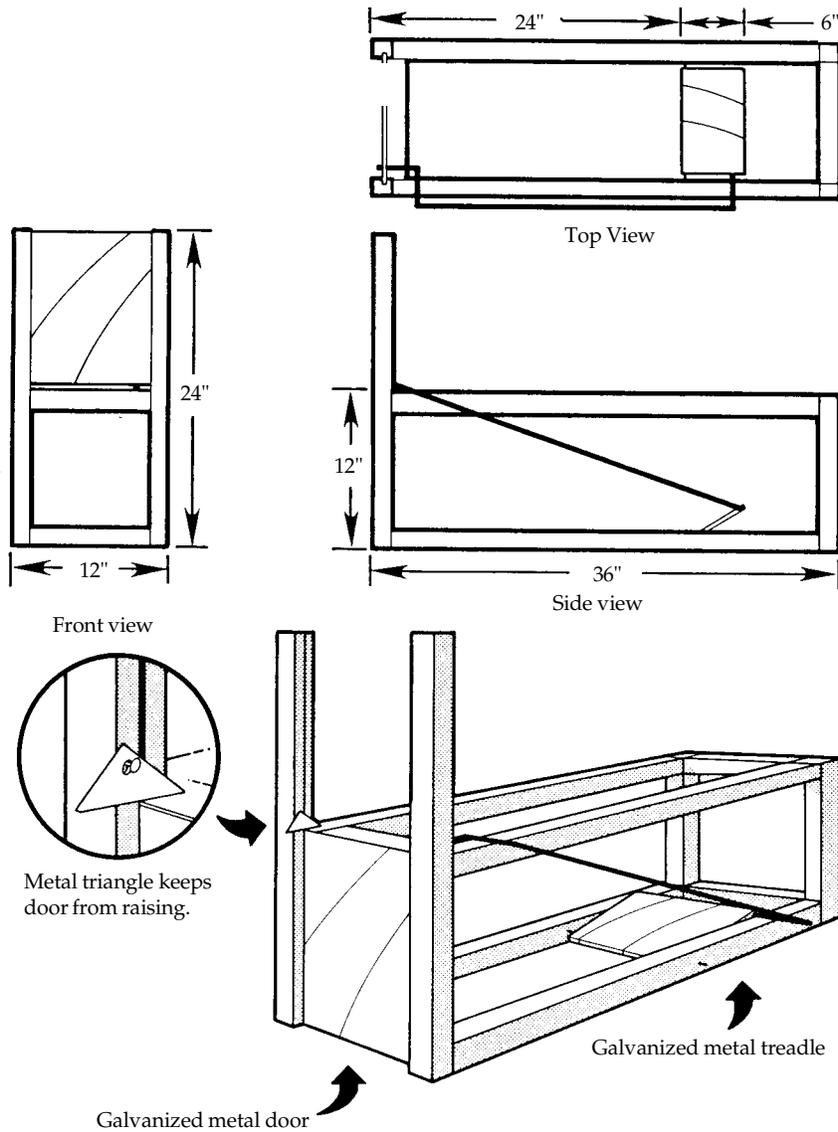
There are no registered repellents for skunks. Most mammals, including skunks, can sometimes be discouraged from entering enclosed areas with moth balls or moth flakes (naphthalene). This material needs to be used in sufficient quantities and replaced often if it is to be effective. Ammonia-soaked cloths may also repel skunks. Repellents are only a temporary measure. Permanent solutions require other methods.

Toxicants

No toxicants are registered for use in controlling skunks.

Fumigants

Two types of gas cartridges are registered for fumigating skunk burrows. Fumigation kills skunks and any other animals present in the burrows by suffocation or toxic gases. Follow label directions and take care to avoid fire hazards when used near structures.



completely covered, it is a proven, effective method for relocating a skunk. If the skunk is to be killed, the US Department of Agriculture recommends shooting or euthanization with CO₂.

Leghold Traps. Leghold traps should not be used to catch skunks near houses because of potential problem of scent discharge. To remove a live skunk caught in a leghold trap, a veterinarian or wildlife official may first inject it with a tranquilizer, then remove it from the trap for disposal or release elsewhere.

Shooting

Skunks caught in leghold traps may be shot. Shooting the skunk in the middle of the back to sever the spinal cord and paralyze the hind quarters may prevent the discharge of scent. Shooting in the back should be followed immediately by shooting in the head. Most people who shoot trapped skunks should expect a scent discharge.

Other Methods

Skunk Removal. The following steps are suggested for removing skunks already established under buildings.

1. Seal all possible entrances along the foundation, but leave the main burrow open.
2. Sprinkle a layer of flour 2 feet (0.6 m) in circumference on the ground in front of the opening.
3. After dark, examine the flour for tracks which indicate that the skunk has left to feed. If tracks are not present, reexamine in an hour.
4. After the den is empty, cover the remaining entrance immediately.
5. Reopen the entrance the next day for 1 hour after dark to allow any remaining skunks to exit before permanently sealing the entrance.

A wooden door suspended from wire can be improvised to allow skunks to leave a burrow but not to reenter. Burrows sealed from early May to

Fig. 4. A box trap can be easily built using scrap lumber and small-mesh, welded-wire fencing.

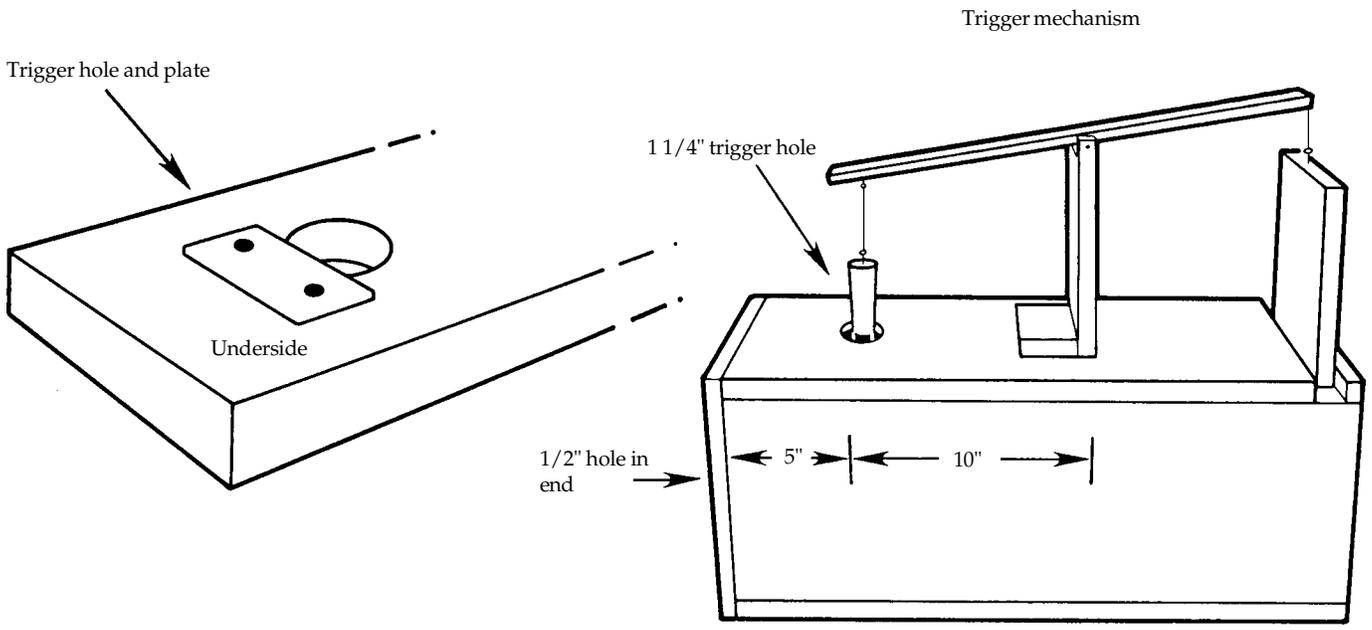
Trapping

Box Traps. Skunks can be caught in live traps set near the entrance to their den. When a den is used by more than one animal, set several traps to reduce capture time. Live traps can be purchased or built. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate traps that can be built easily. Consult state wildlife agency personnel before trapping skunks.

Use canned fish-flavored cat food to lure skunks into traps. Other food baits such as peanut butter, sardines, and chicken entrails are also effective. Before setting live traps, cover them with canvas to reduce the chances of a

trapped skunk discharging its scent. The canvas creates a dark, secure environment for the animal. Always approach a trap slowly and quietly to prevent upsetting a trapped skunk. Gently remove the trap from the area and release or kill the trapped skunk.

Captured skunks should be transported at least 10 miles (16 km) and released in a habitat far from human dwellings. Attach a length of heavy string or fishing line to the trap cover and release the skunk from a distance. Removing and transporting a live-trapped skunk may appear to be a precarious business, but if the trap is



Side view

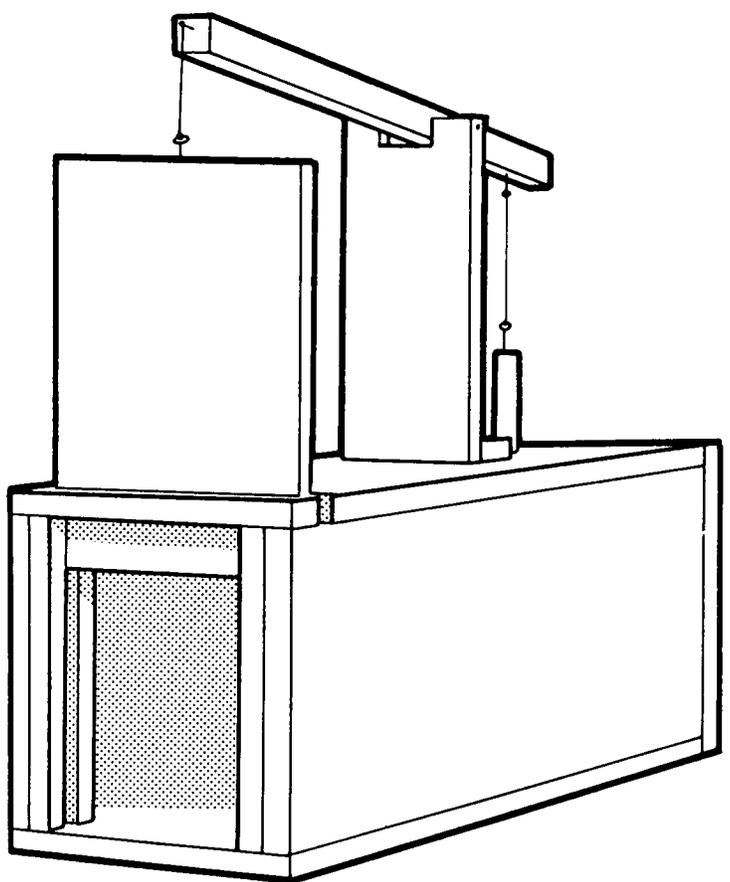
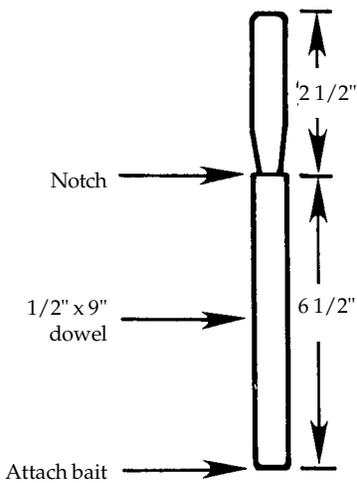


Fig. 5. Alternate design for a box trap.

mid-August may leave young skunks trapped in the den. If these young are mobile they can usually be box-trapped easily using the methods previously described. Where skunks have entered a garage, cellar, or house, open the doors to allow the skunks to exit on their own. Do not prod or disturb them. Skunks trapped in cellar window wells or similar pits may be removed by nailing cleats at 6-inch (15-cm) intervals to a board. Lower the board into the well and allow the skunk to climb out on its own. Skunks are mild-tempered animals that will not defend themselves unless they are cornered or harmed. They usually provide a warning before discharging their scent, stamping their forefeet rapidly and arching their tails over their backs. Anyone experiencing such a threat should retreat quietly and slowly. Loud noises and quick, aggressive actions should be avoided.

Odor Removal. Many individuals find the smell of skunk musk nauseating. The scent is persistent and difficult to remove. Diluted solutions of vinegar or tomato juice may be used to eliminate most of the odor from people, pets, or clothing. Clothing may also be soaked in weak solutions of household chloride bleach or ammonia. On camping trips, clothing can be smoked over a cedar or juniper fire. Neutrolem alpha is a scent-masking solution that can be applied to the sprayed area to reduce the odor. It is available through some commercial cleaning suppliers and the local USDA-APHIS-ADC office. Walls or structural areas that have been sprayed by skunks can be washed down with vinegar or tomato juice solutions or sprayed with neutrolem alpha. Use ventilation fans to speed up the process of odor dissipation. Where musk has entered the eyes, severe

burning and an excessive tear flow may occur. Temporary blindness of 10 or 15 minutes may result. Rinse the eyes with water to speed recovery.

Economics of Damage and Control

Skunks should not be needlessly destroyed. They are highly beneficial to farmers, gardeners, and landowners because they feed on large numbers of agricultural and garden pests. They prey on field mice and rats, both of which may girdle trees or cause health problems. Occasionally they eat moles, which cause damage to lawns, or insects such as white grubs, cutworms, potato beetle grubs, and other species that damage lawns, crops, or hay.

Skunks occasionally feed on ground-nesting birds, but their impact is usually minimal due to the large abundance of alternative foods. Skunks also feed on the eggs of upland game birds and waterfowl. In waterfowl production areas, nest destruction by egg-seeking predators such as skunks can significantly reduce reproduction. The occasional problems caused by the presence of skunks are generally outweighed by their beneficial habits. Some people even allow skunks to den under abandoned buildings or woodpiles. Unless skunks become really bothersome, they should be left alone. An economic evaluation of the feeding habits of skunks shows that only 5% of the diet is made up of items that are economically valuable to people.

The hide of the skunk is tough, durable, and able to withstand rough use. Generally there is little market for skunk pelts but when other furbearer prices are high, skunks are worth pelting.

Acknowledgments

Much of the information for this chapter was based on a publication by F. Robert Henderson.

Figures 1 and 2 from Schwartz and Schwartz (1981).

Figures 3 through 5 by Jerry Downs, Graphic Artist, Cooperative Extension Service, New Mexico State University.

For Additional Information

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