



Skunks in Rhode Island

When most people think of skunks, the first thing that comes to mind is the musky odor often associated with this species. Just the thought of being sprayed, or having a pet being sprayed, brings nauseating thoughts to mind. What most folks don't understand is the value of the skunk to farmers, and gardeners alike.

Description:



The striped skunk is probably the most familiar species of suburban wildlife. It is a member of the Mustelid family, which includes weasels, mink, and otter. The scientific name of the striped skunk is *Mephitis mephitis*, which can be translated into "bad odor." It is characterized by the



white stripes on its back, which are warnings to predators. It has a long bushy tail, a small head, small eyes, small ears, and a pointed nose. The bottoms of its feet are hairless and well adapted for digging, with the front feet having five long, curved claws. Adult skunks can range from 3-12 pounds, depending on age, sex, and feeding habits. Males usually average roughly 15% larger than females.

Of the four skunk species in North America, the striped skunk is the most widely distributed, and it is also the only species found in Rhode Island. Striped skunks can be found abundantly throughout Rhode Island with the exception of Block Island. They can also be found in all of the lower 48 states, northern Mexico, and southern Canada. They range from sea level, all the way to the tree line in mountainous regions, as long as suitable habitat is present. Striped skunks inhabit a wide variety of habitat types, but are found most commonly in agricultural areas, abandoned croplands, and suburban areas. Studies have shown that skunk populations are higher in urban areas than in rural areas.

Life History :

Skunks generally are a nocturnal species, which means they are most active at night. It is not unusual, however, to see skunks foraging at dawn or dusk, or even in daylight hours. Although skunks are not true hibernators, they will go into periods of inactivity in extremely cold weather. For shelter, they prefer burrows that are often made in abandoned homes of other animals. Skunks will widen burrows left behind by woodchucks or other fossorial (burrowing) animals. They will also create their own quarters when a sufficient burrow is unavailable. These burrows are often located in rock piles, wood piles, beneath back-yard sheds, under low porches or in holes in foundations. They prefer to locate their burrows under sloped ground to allow for better drainage during wet periods. Skunks can even share their burrows with other animals, such as woodchucks or opossums. Suburban and urban areas make for good habitat because many den opportunities and feeding opportunities are available.

Breeding usually takes place in February or March, with a high percentage of yearling females taking part. After a gestation period of 60-75 days, females give birth to 4-7 young per litter. Female skunks will often give birth two times per year. Male skunks do not participate in raising the young.

Feeding :

Skunks are omnivorous, which means they eat both plant and animal material. Plant material can include fruits, such as apples and pears, or berries, such as blueberries, raspberries, and mulberries. During spring and summer they eat relatively more animal material because small mammals and insects are more abundant. Skunks will eat grasshoppers, crickets, potato bugs, tobacco worms, wasps and bees. With an excellent sense of smell, they are able to locate, and dig up grubs and ground nesting bees. Surprisingly, they are able to tolerate bee stings quite well. They will also consume mice, toads, frogs, and snakes when available.

In colder weather periods, they will eat grasses, buds, and nuts. Skunks can also feed on eggs or get into poultry coops, but generally they are unable to climb fences to gain access. Skunks can be helpful to farmers by feeding on pest species like insects or small mammals. They become nuisances, however, when they get into trashcans, garbage bins, and pet food.

Musk:

Musk is a defense mechanism used by skunks to defend themselves against would-be predators. Musk is a compound known as butylmercaptan. It is an oily liquid that is creamy and yellowish. Its smell is derived from a sulfur compound. Musk can cause symptoms such as nausea, teary eyes, burning in the nose, and in extreme cases, temporary blindness when sprayed directly into the eyes. Skunks can spray musk as far as 12-15 feet, but only spray as a last resort. When skunks feel threatened they will stomp their front feet, snarl, raise their tail, and arch their back as a warning. Only after all this showmanship will a skunk spray. When it finally does spray, it will turn its behind toward the target and emit the musk from a pair of glands near the anus. These glands are nozzle-like in structure and are powered by a set of strong hip muscles. Contrary to popular belief, a skunk can spray musk even when it's hind legs are off the ground, or when hoisted by the tail. It is important to remember that musk causes no permanent ill effects.

Odor Removal:

There are various ways musk odor can be removed. From clothing, musk can be removed with mixtures of diluted vinegar or tomato juice. These mixtures can also be used to remove odors from pets. Always be cautious in using these mixtures because they can stain your garments. Clothing can be soaked in a weak solution of chlorine bleach, but again, be aware that bleach can discolor clothing. For pets, effective shampoos and odor removers can be purchased at many veterinary offices and pet stores. If musk is sprayed directly into the eyes, rinse thoroughly with water until the symptoms are alleviated



Skunks as Disease Carriers :

Skunks can be carriers of the rabies virus, and if infected, it is usually with the strain of the virus normally associated with raccoons. Their frequent inhabitation of urban and agricultural areas makes them a suitable medium for exposure to humans and pets. Skunk rabies has occurred primarily in the Midwest, ranging from Texas to Alberta. Vaccinations are available to protect pets from contracting this disease. If you, or a family member or child is bitten or scratched by a skunk or any wild animal, it is vitally important to seek medical attention. Also, when pets encounter a skunk, be sure to call your local animal control officer. When you or a family member is scratched or bitten, be sure to call the Department of Health, and a Department of Environmental Management Enforcement officer. If an officer can trap the animal and have it tested, you may be able to avoid getting rabies shots if it tests negative.

The rabies virus is carried in saliva and other bodily fluids, therefore it can be transmitted by bites or scratches. Skunks also carry diseases such as Canine Hepatitis, which poses no health concerns for humans, and is not to be confused with the hepatitis virus associated with humans.



For more information regarding rabies, or other diseases carried by wildlife, contact the Department of Health (401) 222-2577.

Common types of Damage :

One of the major problems with skunks comes from their digging. They can burrow under porches or buildings and enter foundation openings. Skunks can also dig holes in golf courses and in residential lawns in search of insects. They may also dig where fertilizers such as bonemeal, bloodmeal, or fishmeal have been applied. These holes are usually small and can be identified by a conical shape, and a 3-4 inch diameter. Skunks can also dig holes that appear to simply be overturned earth. It is important to remember, however, that many other animals, including domestic dogs, can dig holes in much the same fashion.

Skunks can also feed on farmer's crops such as corn, but usually results in minor damage. When it does occur, however, they often feed only on the bottom ears. When the entire stalk is damaged or knocked down, it is usually raccoons or deer to blame.

In poultry coops, eggs eaten by skunks will be damaged on one end and are usually crushed inward. In the event they kill any of the fowl, only 1 or 2 will be affected but this is much more unlikely of an event for skunks than other animals such as dogs, raccoons, weasels, or minks. When these animals get into coops they will kill several fowl at a time. Dogs will usually



cause considerably more damage than any of the other previously mentioned species. They often cause severe mutilation to the birds. Tracks are always an effective way to determine the guilty species with regards to damaged property.

Preventing Problems :

Skunks can be kept at bay with a number of different techniques. Most importantly, seal off any holes or spaces underneath building with hardware cloth, metal sheeting, or cement. This will keep them from burrowing underneath raised structures, such as sheds or buildings raised on blocks. When using metal sheeting or chicken fence, it is important to bury part of the material in a fashion that does not allow the skunk to burrow underneath it. The best way to do this is to bend the material in the shape of an “L” and bury it so the bottom of the “L” is facing away from the structure you wish to protect. When building these structures you may consider pouring a concrete slab for a foundation.

Since food items will also attract skunks, it is very important not to leave unsecured garbage outdoors. *Be sure not to leave pet food out.* Skunks are also attracted to birdseed, so removing bird feeders can also help rid your yard of skunks. Also, do not put meat scraps or other food related items in compost piles.

Skunks that find themselves trapped in buildings or holes should be left alone to wander out on their own. If the animal cannot climb out of the area it’s in, a simple plank is often enough for the skunk to get out. If the skunk cannot climb the plank, try attaching small wood strips on it, much like the rungs of a ladder.

Skunks in Rhode Island are classified as fur-bearing mammals and can be trapped accordingly. It is very important to remember that moving, or otherwise relocating any wild animal in Rhode Island is against the law. Moving wildlife can spread disease to animals in areas where the nuisance individuals are moved. By moving wildlife, you will only cause harm to the animals, and possibly cause problems for other people who live in the area. Also note that poisons are illegal for use against skunks, or any other animals, and smoking animals from their dens is also illegal.

For more information regarding trapping regulations, proper liscencing procedures, and other questions you may have in dealing with nuisance skunks in your area please contact The Rhode Island Division of Fish and Wildlife Office, Great Swamp Field Headquarters. Phone number: (401)-789 0281 or the Department of Health at (401) 222-2577.

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