USDA Wildlife Services
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Skunk
Ecology & Damage Management


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Wisconsin is home to two native skunk species. The more common is the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*), although they are not typically seen because they are primarily active at night. The spotted skunk (*Spilogale putorius*) is rare in the state.

Skunks have been popularized by cartoon characters such as "Pepe Le Pew" and, like their cartoon counterparts, can be identified by their distinctive black and white coloring and the pungent odor that they sometimes leave behind. While they sometimes cause problems, skunks can benefit landowners, farmers and gardeners alike because they eat common pests like field mice, moles and insects, and serve as prey for other animals. They also do a bit of gardening, by spreading seeds and plants through their feces (scat).

DESCRIPTION

Both striped and spotted skunks are small- to medium-sized mammals. The striped skunk averages 32 inches long (including the tail) and weighs 6-12 pounds. The spotted skunk is 16-23 inches long and weighs 1½-2 pounds. Both species are black with white markings.


Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources

Young striped skunks.

The spotted skunk has four broken white bars running the length of its back, creating a spotted look. Its tail is black and tipped with white. The striped skunk has one stripe along its back that splits in two near the shoulders. Its tail is black and bushy, with a white fringe along the sides. Both species sport non-retractable claws for digging.

Because the spotted skunk is extremely rare (perhaps even extirpated) in Wisconsin, the remainder of this fact sheet will focus on the striped skunk only. However, if you see a spotted skunk in the state, please submit a Rare Mammal Observation Report through the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources website (at http://dnr.wi.gov/org/land/er/forms/rare_mammal.asp).

"Skunks...can be identified by their distinctive black and white coloring and the pungent odor that they sometimes leave behind."

The spotted skunk is rare or extirpated in Wisconsin.

HABITS AND HABITAT

Skunks inhabit a variety of natural areas, including forests, fields and woodland ravines, but they are also at home on farms and in suburbs and cities. They live in dens, often dug under buildings or brush/rock piles; or they may move into burrows abandoned by other animals. Because they do not hibernate during the winter, they may form a colonial den, meaning they den in a family unit, remaining inside during the coldest weather and venturing out only to find food.

Skunks mate between mid-February and mid-March. An average litter of six kits is born about two months later. The kits are born naked and their eyes are closed. They will stay in the den and nurse for the first month and a half of their lives. Kits may stay with their mother for as long as a year.

Skunks are opportunistic eaters and feed on a wide array of food, depending on availability. They are omnivorous and their diet changes with the seasons. In summer and fall, they forage for berries, insects, eggs and corn; in winter they eat primarily small mammals and carrion.

IDENTIFYING SKUNK DAMAGE

While skunks provide multiple benefits, they can also become a nuisance. A skunk's presence in the area is usually obvious, due to the pungent odor they leave behind. However, if there is no lingering aroma, look for scat (a.k.a feces), tracks or the animal itself. Their scat is usually ¼-½ inches in diameter and 1-2 inches long, with undigested insect parts inside. Skunk tracks have five toe prints with visible claw marks on both the fore- and hind feet. Hind feet marks are generally around 2½ inches long and show a distinct heel pad.

Skunk tracks

Skunks adapt easily to living in rural and suburban residential areas. The most common damage they cause results from the digging they do when foraging for food. Skunks dig holes in lawns or "roll up" small sections of sod to look for grubs. The holes are typically small, 2-3 inches in diameter and cone-shaped. The rolled-up areas can be 3-6 inches wide and up to 2 feet long. Skunks may also get into garbage or invade areas around the home and yard. In rural settings, skunks may destroy beehives or eat the eggs of waterfowl, chickens, ground-nesting birds and upland game birds. Scratches on the outside of beehives indicate skunk damage. Eggs open on one end and with the edges crushed inward are characteristic of skunk foraging. Scat, tracks, and either sight or smell can help confirm skunk damage.

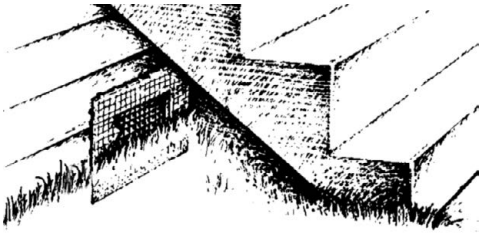
Skunks can carry several diseases, but rabies is the primary concern as skunks are one of the primary carriers of rabies in Wisconsin. Outbreaks typically occur when their numbers increase, leading to increased skunk-skunk and skunk-human contact. Avoid skunks that appear aggressive or are active during the day and contact local wildlife, police or animal welfare officers. If a skunk is suspected to be rabid and makes contact with a human, kill the animal, if possible, and submit it to the county health department for testing. Avoid shooting the animal in the head, because the brain is tested for rabies. Thoroughly wash any skunk-inflicted wound immediately with soap and water, and immediately contact your primary care physician.

Aside from the damage they do and the potential health issues they present, skunks can be a nuisance, due to their unmistakable and persistent odor. A startled skunk can spray up to 20 feet. This spray can stun or temporarily blind the recipient if hit in the face.

To help alleviate the lingering effects of a skunk encounter, mix ¼ cup of baking soda and 1-2 teaspoons of dish soap with a quart of 3-percent hydrogen peroxide. Bathe with the solution, allowing it to remain on fur (or hair) for five minutes. Rinse thoroughly with plain water. Take care not to get the solution near the eyes or mouth, and do not store any left over, as it may become explosive in a closed container. To deodorize a large area, like a house, commercial foggers or atomizers are available. Be sure to check air conditioning systems and air filters for contamination.

LEGAL STATUS

Striped and spotted skunks are classified as an unprotected species under Wisconsin state law. Skunks are considered a furbearer and are actively trapped for their pelts. There are no specified hunting or trapping seasons and landowners may hunt or trap striped skunks without a license whenever damage is occurring on their property. For additional legal information, please refer to the "Laws and Regulations" fact sheet on the Wildlife Damage Management website (available online at wildlifedamage.uwex.edu).



Cover all openings near ground level with screens to keep skunks from making their homes beneath houses and other buildings. Bury the bottom of the covering at least several inches below the soil surface.

CONTROLLING SKUNK DAMAGE

NONLETHAL METHODS

Prevention

Modifying your habitat to make it less attractive to skunks is the most effective way to prevent the animals from invading your property. Always seal garbage cans, dispose of any additional food sources skunks may use, and eliminate any possible shelter (such as woodpiles or an open tool shed). There are pesticides that can help keep your lawn free of grubs.

Exclusion

Excluding skunks from your residence or outbuildings can effectively solve the problem with little to no contact with the animal. Seal off foundation openings with concrete, mesh or sheet metal and cover window wells. If a skunk is caught in a window well, place a ramp (for example, a piece of two-by-four lumber) in the well, to allow the animal to escape on its own.

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An unprotected window well.

If a skunk is denning under your porch or another part of a building, it may be deterred permanently using exclusion. First, seal off all but the main entrance to the burrow. Sprinkle flour near this entrance and check after dark for tracks to see if the animal has left. If the skunk has left the burrow, seal the entrance to prevent it from returning. If you suspect animals are in the den, make sure all are out before sealing the entrance. Take care not to separate the young from the adults when using this method.

Live Trapping

Live trapping a problem skunk using a medium-sized trap baited with a can of cat food or sardines is easy and effective. Place the trap where signs of skunk activity are present and open the trap during nighttime hours. By law, an open trap must be checked at least once every 24 hours. Make the trapped skunk aware of your presence and then approach the trap slowly and quietly. Place a blanket, towel or other type of material over the trap; this and slow movements will allow you to move the trap without getting sprayed. Specialized skunk live traps that use solid-sided construction will decrease the risk of being sprayed. Before you relocate an animal, you must get permission from the property owner or manager to release it on property you neither own nor occupy.

ICWDM – USDA-Wildlife Services

Traps set for a skunk that moved into a crawl space.

Harassment

It may be possible to drive a skunk away from an area with noise, lights and other harassment measures. However, once the animal becomes familiar with a particular type of harassment, the harassment will lose its effectiveness and another option should be used.

LETHAL MANAGEMENT

Fumigants

Carbon dioxide gas cartridges can be inserted in the dens to kill any animals present. Fumigants should not be used for dens that share proximity to an occupied building because the gas could seep into living quarters and make human occupants sick. Always follow directions on the fumigant package. All openings to the den need to be sealed to contain both the skunk and fumigant. After the area is rid of skunks, fill in the den to prevent other animals from using it.

Shooting

Where legal and safe to discharge a rifle or handgun, shooting a skunk can be an effective means of lethal control. Expect some odor and dispose of the carcass by burying it.

Skunk Ecology & Damage Management

This fact sheet is part of a series designed to help you successfully manage wildlife damage problems on your property. The series includes additional publications which focus on controlling damage from specific animals, plus an introduction to wildlife damage management.

REFERENCES

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