



*Spotted skunk (very rare in Wisconsin)*

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# Skunks:

## *How to deal with them*

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by Scott R. Craven

Skunks are found throughout Wisconsin in agricultural areas and woodlands, as well as in towns and cities. For the most part, they are beneficial because they feed on insects and rodents. Occasionally, however, skunks can cause problems, particularly when they release their odorous musk (in self-defense) near buildings. They often burrow under porches and other spots where odors may linger for a long time.

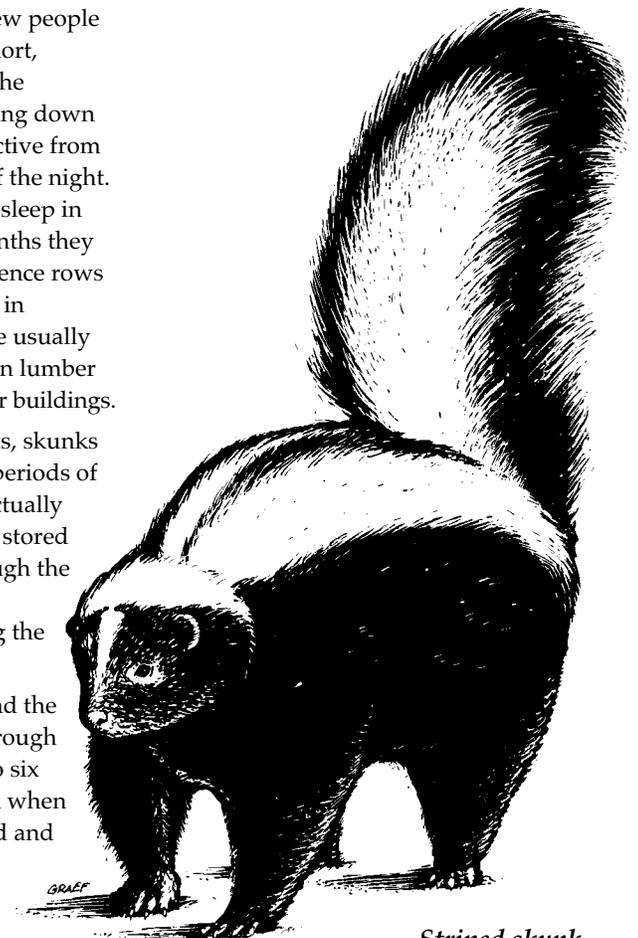
### Skunk facts

Skunks are members of the weasel family (*Mustelidae*). The striped skunk is abundant in Wisconsin. The spotted skunk, however, is very rare. In fact, observing a spotted skunk is so unusual that, if you see one, you should report it to the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources or the University of Wisconsin-Madison wildlife ecology department. The few reported sightings of the spotted skunk in Wisconsin occurred in southwestern counties. The animal is more common in Iowa and Minnesota.

The common striped skunk is about the size of a large domestic cat. Few people would fail to recognize this short, stocky, jet-black animal with the distinctive white stripes running down its back. Skunks are usually active from early evening through most of the night. During the day they typically sleep in dens, though in the warm months they may bed in vegetation along fence rows or waterways, in hayfields, or in pastures or cropland. Dens are usually below ground, but may exist in lumber piles, stumps, crevices or under buildings.

During the cold winter months, skunks are often inactive in dens for periods of days or weeks. They do not actually hibernate, but they do rely on stored body fat to sustain them through the winter. Several skunks may conserve body heat by sharing the same den during the winter.

Skunks mate in late winter, and the young are born from April through June. There are usually four to six young per litter. Skunks wean when they are about two months old and leave the female in autumn to make their own way.



*Striped skunk*

Male skunks travel more widely than females. The male's home range may be 1 to 1½ miles in diameter, but during mating season it may travel up to 5 miles a night. It is during this time that skunks, which are slow-moving and reluctant to flee when endangered, are often struck by cars.

Skunks eat both plant and animal materials but prefer insects such as crickets, grasshoppers, beetles, cutworms and insect larvae. Skunks sometimes damage bee colonies since they also feed on adult and larval bees. They dig in the soil and usually leave small holes in the ground where they have fed. This behavior can be a problem when skunks feed in well-maintained lawns. They also eat mice, rats, shrews, moles, ground squirrels and other small mammals as well as garden vegetables and fruit. Occasionally, they eat birds and birds' eggs. Most of their diet consists of animals which humans consider injurious. Therefore, when skunks are not causing problems, many people believe they should be left alone because they do more good than harm.

Skunks are also considered fur bearers. Despite the distinctive coloration, their fur is quite long and soft.

## Skunk problems

Skunks are disliked mostly because of their ability to discharge a very obnoxious odor when provoked. Two internal glands located at the base of the tail produce a thick, volatile, oily liquid that contains odorous chemical compounds. This scent is most often released in self-defense. A skunk will usually give warning that it is about to release its scent by stamping its front feet rapidly with its tail erect and growling or hissing. The spotted skunk may even walk a short distance on its front feet before releasing scent. When its tail is raised, a skunk can discharge one or both glands to form a stream of liquid that disperses as a spray. This fluid can be directed accurately for up to 10 feet and somewhat less accurately for

up to 20 feet. Skunks can discharge their scent glands several times within a short period. If the fluid gets into your eyes, it will be painful and may cause blindness for a few minutes.

## RABIES

Skunks are very susceptible to rabies—a serious viral disease that infects many types of warm-blooded animals. When infected, skunks can transmit rabies to other animals by direct contact, usually biting. In any population of skunks, only a small percent may be infected at any given time. However, when skunks are abundant, there is more opportunity for rabies to be spread among the population and to other animals, such as dogs, cats, livestock or humans, through bites or other types of exposure.

When a skunk becomes infected with the rabies virus, the disease may not be apparent as rapidly as it is in dogs or in some other species, and symptoms may not appear for weeks or even months. During this period, a "diseased" skunk may infect other animals it contacts. In the final stages of the disease, skunks may seem tame or listless and wander about in the daytime, exhibiting little fear of people. They can also appear unusually aggressive or nervous and may salivate.

Parents should warn children never to approach or pet any skunk or other wild animal, and all pet dogs and cats should be vaccinated for rabies. Do not keep skunks or wild animals as pets because they cannot be immunized against the disease. Furthermore, they may have contracted rabies at an early age and fail to exhibit symptoms for some time.

If you are bitten by a skunk, capture and cage the animal if possible. Do not shoot the skunk in the head if it is to be tested for rabies. Scrub out the wound with warm water and soap for at least 20 minutes before seeking medical attention. Submit the whole skunk or at least the skunk's head to the State Laboratory of Hygiene in Madison, which can determine if it was rabid. The specimen should be submitted fresh and iced or

fresh frozen. Your local public health authorities, physician or veterinarian can provide additional information and assistance.

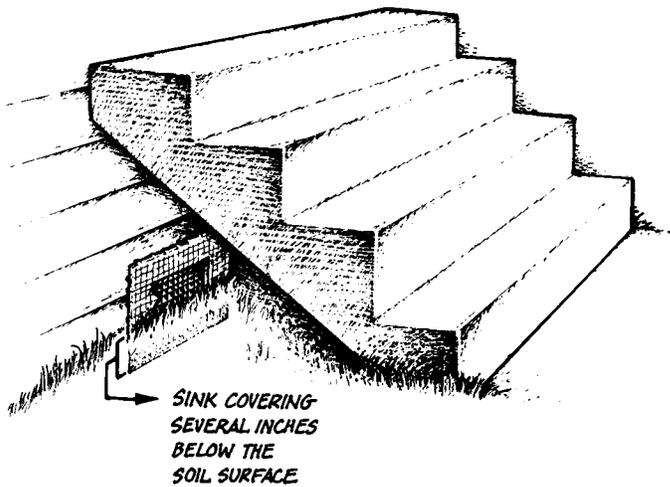
## Skunk control—exclusion and habitat modification

Many problems with skunks around homes and farms can be prevented by keeping skunks from getting beneath buildings. Use sturdy wire mesh (¼-inch hardware cloth or similar materials) to screen openings near ground level in houses and other structures. Tightly seal holes in foundations or under porches to prevent skunks from making homes there.

If a skunk is living under a building, wait until dark and let the skunk leave to seek food. Tracks at the den entrance will indicate that the animal has left. Sprinkle sand, dust or flour at the entrance to help see tracks. If you are not sure of the number of skunks present, you can keep each skunk out as it leaves by making a one-way door. To make the door, attach a section of ½-inch hardware wire cloth to the opening. The cloth should be hinged at the top, left loose on the other three sides and cut larger than the opening so that it cannot swing inward. The skunks will push it open to leave but will not be able to reenter.

When the skunks are gone, seal the entrance securely. Young skunks may remain in the den from April through August. *Be sure all animals are out before sealing up the entrance.* Extend the wire screen or other barrier materials several inches below the ground to prevent the skunk from digging under it. Alternately, the barrier can include a wire skirt at ground level extending at least 12 inches horizontally outward from the entrance.

Moth balls or moth flakes (naphthalene or paradichlorobenzene) scattered or placed in porous cloth bags suspended in the den area, or liquid ammonia



*Screen openings near ground level to keep skunks from making homes beneath houses and other buildings.*

solution in a shallow pan, may discourage skunks from returning. However, these materials are not registered by the Environmental Protection Agency for this purpose.

*Caution: The odor of mothballs is also offensive to humans and mothballs can harm helpless young animals. Be careful.* Bright lights placed under decks can also serve a similar function.

When a skunk falls into a window well, cellar or hole in the ground, carefully lower a cleated or rough board into the hole to offer it an escape route.

You can discourage skunks from coming near your home or farmyard by removing brush piles, stacked lumber, wood piles and similar sources of shelter. Dog or cat food left outside for family pets is also very attractive to skunks.

A fence can exclude skunks from landscaped areas, gardens, school yards and other such places. One-inch poultry netting in a 3-foot width is recommended. The bottom 12 inches should be below the ground surface, extending 6 inches down and then 6 inches outward in an "L" shape. This will discourage most skunks from digging under it.

Skunk damage to lawns, resulting from their digging for insects and worms, can be reduced by applying an appropriate insecticide to eliminate the food source.

Consult your county Extension office or garden center for advice on which insecticide to use. Be aware that some insecticides may affect desirable wildlife, such as songbirds, either directly by their toxicity or indirectly by eliminating their food sources.

To exclude skunks from a beehive, take a piece of scrap plywood or board about 1 foot square and drive one nail (about 2-inch nails of any type) through every square inch of the wood. The result is a pincushion arrangement that can be placed on the ground beneath the entrance to the hive. A commercial wire product for bird control generically called "porcupine wire" will accomplish the same thing.

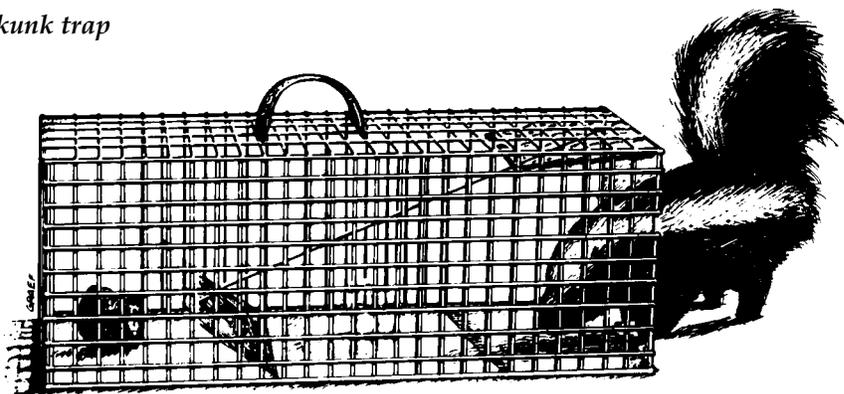
## TRAPPING

When necessary, skunks can be trapped and removed from areas where they are unwanted. Use a live trap, approximately 9 x 9 x 24 inches or smaller, baited with canned or fresh fish, fish-flavored cat food, chicken parts, bacon or peanut butter on bread. Mayonnaise or fruit also work well and are not as likely to attract dogs or cats. A small trap will catch skunks, cost less and reduce the chance of spraying.

Skunks are caught fairly easily and, if handled carefully, can be transported without releasing their scent. Slowly approach the trapped skunk and cover the trap with a tarp or piece of thick burlap. Or, wrap the trap in heavy cloth or burlap at the time it is set (this may also encourage the skunk to enter). In the darkened trap, the skunk will be less fearful and less likely to release its scent. Carefully pick up the covered trap and place it gently in an open vehicle for transporting. Avoid sudden, jarring movements or loud noises which may frighten the skunk. Striped skunks seldom release scent when handled in this manner.

In Wisconsin, captured skunks may be relocated and released alive. If skunks are released on public lands, a DNR permit is required. However, because of the danger of spreading rabies by relocating a potentially infected animal, it is recommended that the captured skunk be moved only to a location where it can be humanely destroyed. A

*Skunk trap*



skunk that shows signs of aggression, very nervous activity or salivation should be handled with extreme care and destroyed as soon as possible.

To dispose of a trapped skunk humanely, place a tarp or plastic sheet over the trap and pipe engine exhaust under the tarp for 5 to 10 minutes. Another method is to submerge the covered trap in water for 5 to 10 minutes; however, the skunk is likely to release its scent if you use this method. If you believe these methods are unsatisfactory, consult a local humane society representative or veterinarian for a recommendation. Some drugs or anesthetics may be useful if the equipment and expertise needed to administer them is available locally.

Steel foot-hold or body-grip type traps can also be used to catch skunks although they are more likely to provoke the skunk to release its scent. If these traps are used, place them a safe distance downwind from buildings. Before using such traps, check with the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources on current trapping regulations. Certain sizes and types of traps and trap sets are illegal in some locations.

A 6 x 6-inch or 7½ x 7½-inch body-grip trap will kill a skunk quickly. A 20 to 30 foot chain or wire on the trap will aid in disposing of the skunk—the trapper can stay at a distance from the trapped skunk while removing it to a suitable location for disposal. The trapper should beware of the possibility of bites if the skunk is alive and approached too closely. *Never place any type of trap where pets might be caught.*

## SHOOTING

Shooting is not recommended to dispose of skunks, as it often results in the release of odor. Disposal of trapped skunks by gassing or drowning, as previously described, is preferable if the skunk is to be checked for rabies.

## POISONS

There are no oral toxicants (ingested poisons) currently registered to control skunks. Trapping is the preferred method.

## Skunk odor control

Neutrolem alpha (NA) is a commercial deodorant that effectively masks skunk odor. Diluted in water, NA can be used to wash pets and humans or to scrub basements, garages, floors, walls, and outdoor furniture. It can also be sprayed indoors from an aerosol container or sprayed onto contaminated soil. Other chemicals comparable to NA include “NI-712”, “Odor-Sol”, “Skunkoff” and “OE5” odor control. One of these or other alternatives should be available from local commercial sources.

Other commercial-strength deodorizers, available from pest control operators (exterminators), janitorial supply houses and kennel supply houses, may also be effective.

A new “recipe” for skunk odor, especially on pets, has been widely circulated and highly rated! Mix one quart of 3% hydrogen peroxide with ¼ cup of baking soda and one teaspoon of liquid soap. Bathe the pet in this mixture and rinse well with plain tap water. *Do not* store the extra mix—it can be explosive in a confined space.

Tomato juice, vinegar, diluted household chlorine bleach, ammonia diluted with water or a detergent solution can also be used to treat contaminated pets or objects. When applied liberally and thoroughly on the affected material, they will greatly reduce the odor. Be aware that these solutions may cause color changes on certain materials. Washing down a building with a garden hose or blowing air with a window fan will help speed up odor removal. In treating pets, keep solutions of ammonia or bleach away from their eyes. Ammonia water can also be sprayed in a room to aid in eliminating the odor. Burning a citronella candle in a room will also help reduce skunk odor. Rain or dampness often rekindle odor which previously seemed to be eliminated.

## PROFESSIONAL ASSISTANCE

If you do not wish to deal with a skunk problem yourself, there are private nuisance wildlife contractors in most urban areas. They can handle problems quickly for a fee. Contact a USDA Animal Damage Control office for a referral list.

## For more information

USDA-APHIS-ADC  
W7231 Highway 49  
Waupun, WI 53963  
414-324-4514 or 1-800-433-0688

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