

Little Stinkers

Skunks live among us, but they're not looking for trouble—**just food.**

What do you think of when you hear the word “skunk”? Chances are, a nasty odor like burned tires and rotten eggs pops into your mind. That dreaded scent comes from a liquid made inside the skunk's body, and it can be sprayed whenever the skunk feels trapped by a larger animal.

Skunks spray only when they absolutely have to. These clever and easygoing animals live throughout Minnesota, often close to people—on farms, in towns, and even in big cities. Most of the time, they go about their peaceful lives unnoticed as we sleep.

Black and White. All skunks have black fur with white stripes or spots.

Most skunks are no bigger than a house cat, with a tail that's as long and fluffy as a feather duster.

Ten *species*, or kinds, of skunks can be found in North and South America. Minnesota has two skunk species: striped and spotted. You're much more likely to see a striped skunk because a spotted skunk hasn't been seen in the state since 2011.

The striped skunk is larger than any other North American species. Its black fur is marked with white that starts on the head and splits into a V along the spine. A thin slash of white fur runs between the skunk's black eyes, from forehead to nose. Every striped skunk has its own unique fur pattern.



DNR PHOTOS

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One of a Kind

The skunk's fur coat tells us that it's a mammal, an animal that is warm-blooded and produces milk to feed its young. But there's no other mammal quite like a skunk.

Scientists divide the mammals into smaller groups based on how they behave and how they are related. For example, mammals that catch and chew prey must have sharp teeth and long claws. This group is called the *carnivores*. It includes cats, dogs, bears, and other hunters—such as skunks.

In Search of Prey. Their vision is not excellent, but skunks have a finely tuned sense of smell. They are *nocturnal*, active mostly at night. Sniffing and snuffling as they walk, skunks locate mice in their nests and flush sleeping grasshoppers from fields. Frogs and crayfish are also on the menu. Skunks chase after their prey in short leaps. Long front claws work like a cage to capture and hold the food as it is eaten.

Skunks also eat nuts and fruit. Now and then, skunks come across a gar-

bage can that has been tipped over by raccoons. They don't hesitate to climb in and grab a few tasty scraps. Dried corn is fair game if skunks come across it in a field, farmyard, or barn. Skunks will even eat rotting meat from animals that have died.

How the Skunk Got Its Name. More than 2,000 years ago, ancient Romans worshiped a goddess called Mefitis. Her temples were built where foul-smelling gases rose from cracks in the earth. (Today we would call them volcanoes.) Ancient Romans believed

these dark and smelly spaces led to the Underworld, where an even more powerful god ruled over the spirits of the dead. Many centuries later, scientists decided to give every species a Latin name. For the striped skunk they chose *Mephitis mephitis*, in honor of the volcano goddess.

Of course, American Indian people had already named the animals living around them. In the 1600s, European colonists heard Abenaki Indians describe this black-and-white animal as *segankw*. Over time, English speakers changed the word to *skunk*.



DAVID BRISLANCE



BILL MARCHEL

The Long Winter

Winter is hard on small animals. Food is scarce, and freezing temperatures can be life threatening—even to mammals with a thick coat of fur. A skunk's best hope for survival is to cozy up and wait out the worst of the season.

Getting Ready. Throughout autumn, skunks eat as much as they can find. Their mixed diet makes it easy for a skunk to fatten up. Sometimes, fat is the only source of energy a skunk can rely on to survive the long, hungry months of winter.

Settling In. When temperatures drop

and snow flies, skunks head underground. A skunk's long, curved claws make excellent tools for digging. Sometimes, a skunk hollows out a fresh burrow for its winter nap. Or it might settle into an empty den made by another animal. Several skunks curl up together to share body heat inside the winter den. Usually, a single den contains several females guarded by one male.

Striped skunks go into *torpor* in winter. Torpor is a kind of slowing down, different than the deep hibernation used by bats, frogs, and chipmunks. For a few hours or days, the skunk's body

temperature drops and its metabolism slows. Less of the skunk's stored fat is needed to make energy.

Skunks go into torpor more often during very cold winters. When the weather is mild, they remain awake in their dens or step out for a few hours to look for food. But winter takes its toll. Skunks can lose more than half their body weight over the winter.

Spring Is Coming. By mid-February, skunks can sense that winter is coming to an end. *Bucks* and *does* (male and female skunks) mate in February and March, then go their separate ways.

As the snow melts, a doe looks for a

place to raise her young. She might dig a new den or use a hollow log or a rock pile. Thick shrubs can provide shelter. If she lives near people, the doe can set up her house under a porch or in a barn. She wants a place that is safe and dark, with food and water nearby. The doe lines her nest with leaves and grass to make it warm and soft. Four to six *kits*, sometimes more, are born in early May.

Skunks rarely fight with each other—except in spring. A mother skunk will not allow male skunks near her kits, and she fearlessly defends them against predators. If she senses a threat, the doe moves her whole family to a new den. Better safe than sorry.



SPARKY STENSAAS



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Curious Kits

Striped skunk kits are born blind and helpless. Each kit weighs barely an ounce—about as much as five quarters. Only a thin, downy covering of fur protects the baby skunks' bodies. But their skin is already marked with a familiar pattern that will color their fur coat when it grows in.

At first, the kits stay hidden inside the den while mother skunk leaves at night to hunt. Their main food is her nutritious milk. After about four weeks, the kits' eyes open. It's not long before they begin to sneak outside the

den. The curious kits wander nearby, wrestle with each other, or play with sticks and other objects. Play and exploration are fun ways to practice the adult skills they will need to survive.

Skunk School. When the kits are about six weeks old, their mother takes them out into the world. A group of skunks is called a *surfeit*, which means "too much of something." But a family of skunks together is actually rather charming. The kits walk in single file behind their mother, like

schoolchildren following a teacher.

The doe teaches her family by example. She catches caterpillars and rolls them between her front paws before she eats them to rub off the toxic hairs that can make a skunk sick. She cracks bird eggs with a quick toss against a hard surface. She shows kits how to knock on a beehive. When the bees buzz out, the hungry skunks can reach in to pull out sweet honey. And while hunting crayfish or frogs, the kits learn that their webbed toes work like paddles if they must swim.

Human neighbors are often scared of skunks. But we can benefit when

a skunk family visits. Mother skunk shows her young to dig for beetle grubs in the soil. They remove harmful insects like Japanese beetles and snails that damage our gardens and crops. Young skunks also learn to catch mice that could eat grain or spread disease.

Grown Up. Young skunks are ready to leave home by early August. Males wander until they locate new territories, while females often stay with the mother for their first year of life. Skunks prefer to live alone until winter forces them to find company once again.

Back Off!

Most mammals have brown fur that helps them hide from predators or sneak up on prey. A skunk's bold black-and-white coat serves a different purpose. It is a warning: Back off or you'll regret it!

Ready, Aim, Fire. A skunk always tries to avoid danger. When it can't run away, the skunk works hard to make the enemy leave. It hisses, grunts, and stamps its feet on the ground. The bright white tail is raised into the air like a flag, making the small skunk look larger and fiercer. When all other warnings fail, the striped skunk turns its back to the predator. Keeping its tail raised, the skunk looks its enemy in the eye, aims, and fires.

Skunks are born with the ability to produce liquid *musk* from a pair of glands on their bottom. They can release a fine mist of musk or direct a stream of the liquid at targets up to 20 feet away. Young foxes, coyotes, and bobcats sometimes make the mistake of hunting skunks. It's a painful choice. Musk not only stinks—it burns and causes nausea. The predator is blinded for a few minutes, while the skunk escapes. After it recovers, the predator avoids black-and-white creatures in its path.

Skunks are not so well protected against flying predators, especially great horned owls. These night fliers can drop down silently on skunks from above. And because owls have very little sense of smell, the musk doesn't bother them.

Stopping the Stink. You can do a few things to avoid skunk sprays. When you're outside at night, use a flashlight so skunks know to run the other way. Keep your dogs on a leash or indoors. Lock down garbage-can lids so raccoons can't pry them open, which invites skunks and other animals to feast. And be sure to vaccinate your pets against rabies and distemper, so they don't become ill if they come into contact with an infected wild animal.

When the worst happens, skip the tomato-juice bath. Experts say that skunk musk is best removed with a mixture of hydrogen peroxide or white vinegar, baking soda, and liquid soap. Find a safe recipe before experimenting because these ingredients can be dangerous when used incorrectly.

People and skunks are bound to cross paths. A bit of common sense can help us live as good neighbors. ✓

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