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## FOOD HABITS OF THE SKUNK.\*

BY FRANK C. PELLETT.

In observation of the food habits of the birds of prey one can take advantage of the fact that food must be brought to the young in the nest. With the skunk, which is a nocturnal animal, many difficulties present themselves in gathering sufficient information on which to base a conclusion, and it must be confessed in the beginning that the results are rather of a negative than a positive character. Animals in captivity adapt themselves to their environment quickly and form habits which perhaps might not be normal when living under natural conditions. In making the observations on this animal extending over more than five years, the writer has used every means within his reach to acquire accurate information as to the natural food habits. Four individuals of the Northern Plains Skunk were kept in captivity for several months. About a dozen different individuals of the Little Spotted Skunk (*Spilogale interrupta*) have been observed for varying periods of time without any restriction being placed on their movements, excepting for a day or two when they were brought to my home and released at nightfall.

Inasmuch as skunks are almost universally persecuted by farmers because of the impression that they destroy poultry, the special thought has been to determine to what extent poultry does furnish these animals with food. That skunks do kill poultry is of course unquestioned. I have a mounted specimen of the larger species that killed thirty chickens in one night and which was shot in the midst of his victims. That the habit is infrequently formed I have been compelled to believe after looking into the matter as fully as my opportunities would permit. To begin with, hens were placed in the same pen with the captive skunks, yet although apparently an object of great curiosity, the skunks seemed disinclined to attack them. When the hens were removed and a mouse or large insect thrown into the pen the skunks behaved very differently. They snapped up the mouse or insect so quickly as to surprise one after noting their usual slow and awkward movements. Hen's eggs placed field nesting birds were not tried.

\*See Forest and Stream November 26, 1910.

The captives were treated to almost every kind of food available from the kitchen as well as fruits, vegetables and various kinds of animal food. They seemed to relish a wide range of food, though apparently in the pen were sniffed and rolled about but no attempt made to eat them. Smaller eggs such as would ordinarily be found in the nests of preferring mice and insects to anything else. That the poultry killing habit is formed in times of scarcity, usually in winter, has been my conclusion after noting the habits of the captives and the behavior of those which lived unrestrained about the premises. To test the matter fully a young crow was placed in the pen without a roosting place and left there for twenty-four hours. Other food was available and the bird received scant attention. Later the bird was again placed there and left until the animals finally attacked it and would have killed it had it not been removed. On one occasion a neighbor caught a little Spotted Skunk (*interrupta*) in a wire trap. As the animal was uninjured I brought it home and kept it for twenty-four hours in a small pen with no food excepting one mouse. The hens were roosting in a small house near at hand on roosts not more than eighteen inches from the ground and with an open door. The second evening the skunk was released after dark when the family had all entered the house so that there would be no danger of frightening it away. The premises apparently were attractive to his skunkship for either it remained for some time or another similar in appearance did so, for we occasionally saw it moving about in the outbuildings or running across the yard. Neither cat or dog is kept on the premises as we do not desire to interfere in the least with birds or animals under observation. We have kept very close watch of the poultry during these observations and feel sure that no poultry has been lost from either carnivorous animals or birds of prey without our knowledge. Never did this skunk touch a chicken to our knowledge. On the other hand the place has been more free from rats and mice during its stay than usual.

On one occasion rats became very troublesome under a big pile of cobs in one of the outbuildings. A cat with a fine reputation as a ratter was borrowed and confined in the building. She made so little impression that she was soon returned to her owner. Not long after a small skunk took up its abode in the same building and the rats moved out with little delay and less ceremony. The same thing was repeated a year or two later minus the cat. During cold weather one winter one of these little skunks killed a full grown hen. A trap was promptly set beside its victim and the animal disposed of. This was the only instance of the kind among a dozen or more observed. They

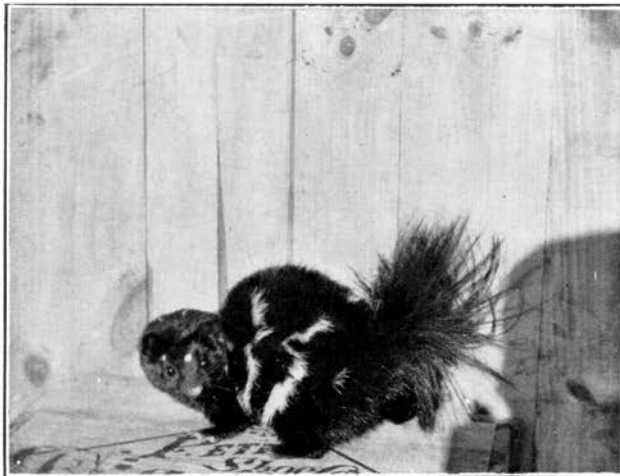
are expert in catching pocket gophers and I have several times found them in the holes apparently in pursuit of the gopher. In winter they frequently catch rabbits and I have found tracks in the fresh snow leading to the hiding place of the cottontail, while the blood-stained remnant of the carcass of that animal told the story of a tragedy. On several occasions I have known the little skunks to follow the cottontail into a box trap where both were caught together.

The animals seem to be fond of apples and will sometimes eat tomatoes. I have seen them scratch out the seeds from a pumpkin and devour them and have known them to eat cabbage when hungry. They eat honey very greedily when available. The captives soon learned to eat almost anything in the way of table scraps in much the same way as the ordinary family cat.

During the five years that we have cultivated skunks and tried to become intimately acquainted with them we have used every inducement to attract them, even to releasing captives. The hens have all this time roosted in houses not more than three feet high and on roosts not more than eighteen inches above ground. Excepting a few extremely cold nights the doors have been constantly open and poultry has been easily available. We have desired to know the real truth, not to justify a preconceived prejudice. The longer the experiment is conducted and the greater the number of individuals under observation the stronger becomes the conviction that the skunk is a valuable friend in reducing the rodent pests and destroying insects, especially grasshoppers, crickets and June beetles; and that the poultry killing habit is accidental and unusual and confined to a small percentage of the individuals of either species of skunks.



A captive skunk.



Little spotted skunk.