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SKUNKS

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Wildlife Damage Management Series

Skunks are among the most widely distributed mammals in North America. The striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) is found throughout the United States and parts of Canada, while the spotted skunk (*Spilogale gracilis*) occurs mainly in the United States. Both species are found in Utah.

Skunks are readily recognized by their black and white pelage pattern and their unique, odorous musk which they use for defense against predators. Skunks are omnivores and feed on a wide variety of plant and animal material. Their diet includes berries, fruits, vegetables, insects, small rodents, reptiles, eggs, and young birds.

The striped skunk has short, stocky legs and is about the size of a house cat. They have two broad white stripes running the length of their jet black body from the apex of the neck to the base of the tail. A single white stripe separates the eyes and the long bushy tail is tipped in white (Figure 1). Adult striped skunks can weigh up to 10 pounds. Adult spotted skunks weigh from 2 to 4 pounds. Their smaller size and the presence of white spots and short, broken white stripes on a black body can be used to distinguish this species.

SKUNK PROBLEMS

Skunks are highly adaptable. They frequently live in close association with humans. Although skunks are commonly considered a nuisance, their tendency to consume insects and rodents harmful to agriculture crops may benefit farmers. Unfortunately, these same activities can also create additional damage situations.

Skunks eat the eggs and young of ground nesting birds. Skunks may also damage vegetable gardens, kill and eat domestic poultry and their eggs. Occasionally they may damage beehives while trying to feed on the bees.

Skunks disrupt unsecured garbage cans and consume pet food that is left outdoors. They may also damage lawns, athletic fields, and golf courses by digging up turf as they search for food.



Figure 1. A striped skunk in a defense stance, and ready to spray.

Skunk denning activities can also result in damage. Dens located under buildings can be a nuisance to building occupants should the skunk release its musk.

Lastly, skunks can also be a major disease factor. In many states skunks are the primary wildlife carrier of rabies. They may also be infected with tularemia, distemper, Aleutians disease and several parasites including fleas, lice, mites, ticks, roundworms, tapeworms, and flatworms.

BIOLOGY AND BEHAVIOR

Skunks mate in late February to early March,. Average gestation period is 62 to 66 days. Skunk kits are born from early May to early June. Litter sizes can range from 2 to 10.

Kits are born blind and thinly furred. Their eyes open in 17 to 21 days, and by 2 to 4 weeks of age, the kits are available to expel musk from their glands. They begin to hunt with their mother at about 2 months of age. Until then, they are left alone in the den when the mother goes out hunting. The kits remain with their mother until autumn.

Skunks are solitary animals. They come together only during the breeding season and during winter when several may be found denning together. Although skunks do not hibernate, they may become inactive for extended periods during the winter.

Skunks have poor to fair senses of hearing and smelling. They also tend to be somewhat clumsy runners due to their short, stocky front legs.

Skunks are characterized as being shy, secretive animals. They discharge their scent when disturbed, cornered, or harassed. Prior to releasing scent, the skunk often will stamp its forefeet rapidly while lifting its plume over its back,

If you are confronted by a skunk and this behavior is noticed, retreat slowly from the area and avoid making any loud noises or aggressive motions. A skunk has the ability to direct the musk to either side, in back of, or in front of its body, by alternating the direction of the protractile glands. The fluid may be expelled a distance of 8 to 15 feet, with a mist going even farther.

Skunks are primarily nocturnal, but may at times be seen in early morning or late afternoon while searching for food. Their normal home range is from ½ to 1 ½ square miles. During the breeding period, males may wander 4 to 5 miles a night.

A skunk's diet varies greatly throughout the year. During spring, skunks may feed on mice, eggs, snakes, insect grubs and larvae. Small areas of up-turned earth may be evidence that a skunk has been digging for insects or grubs. In summer, skunks will feed mainly on grasshoppers, crickets, beetles and other insects. Fruits and berries, while in season, are also a valuable food for the skunk. During winter, they occasionally eat voles, shrews, mice, cottontail rabbits, chipmunks and other small mammals.

LEGAL STATUS

Striped skunks may be killed in Utah anytime without a license, using legal methods. Spotted skunks may be killed without a license when they are creating a nuisance or causing damage. However, their skins or glands may not be sold or traded unless a Utah furbearer license is possessed. Trapping and shooting restrictions also may apply within city limits, around livestock and other structures. Be sure to check restrictions in your county before taking action. Utah state law prohibits possessing five skunks without a permit. Possession permits may be issued by the Division of Wildlife Resources if appropriate justification is provided.

CONTROL

IDENTIFICATION OF DAMAGE

Skunk damage to turf can be identified by small 3- to 4 inch cone-shaped holes in the ground or by small patches of exposed earth. Turf damage may be reduced by using an insecticide to eliminate grub populations. Use those insecticides which are rated as having low toxicity to wildlife.

Skunks usually will not climb fences. Therefore, poultry killed within a fenced area were probably not the result of a skunk, unless skunks have gained access by digging under the fence or through an opening in the fence. In such cases skunks will normally just feed on the eggs and may kill one or two birds. Skunk-damaged eggs typically will be opened only on one end and crushed inward. If multiple birds are killed or mutilated, that may indicate dog, raccoon, mink, or weasel activity.

HABITAT MODIFICATION

Brush piles, open irrigation pipes, and junk cars offer shelter to skunks. The presence of these human-altered habitats may encourage use of an area by skunks. Grain storage areas, barns, sheds and garbage which provide food sources may also attract skunks. Eliminating potential den sites and food sources from an area is an essential step in long-term reduction of skunk numbers.

EXCLUSION

Skunks can be excluded from denning under buildings that lack concrete basements or foundations by sealing all holes with fine wire mesh. A 2-foot wire mesh with the bottom 6 inches bent out at a 90 degree angle and buried at a depth of 6 inches will prevent skunks from digging underneath buildings.

Skunks that become established under buildings have been removed by using chemical repellents, trapping and exclusion techniques. Some vertebrate pest control officials have had success repelling skunks from under buildings by placing mothballs, naphthalene flakes, or paradichlorobenzene crystals in the areas being used as den sites. Rags soaked with cleaning solutions of bleach or ammonia have also been reported to be effective repellents.

To determine if a skunk is still using an area, seal all possible openings except for the maintenance. Flour, or some similar material that will record tracks, should then be spread out on the ground in front of the main entrance. After dark, examine the site for tracks (Figure 2).

If tracks are present and they indicate that the skunk has exited, immediately close the opening. If no tracks are present, return in an hour to re-examine the site. If there are still no tracks, continue to observe the site for several days. If no tracks are observed over this time period the entrance can be sealed.

Chicken coops or poultry houses may be skunk-proofed by sealing all non-essential building openings. Four to six foot widths of wire mesh fencing may be used to fence poultry yards. The bottom 6 inches of fencing should be bent outward at a 90 degree angle and buried to a depth of 6 inches to discourage skunks from digging under the fence.

Damage to beehives can be prevented by placing the hives on stands at least 3 feet high. Aluminum guards placed around the bottom of supports will keep skunks from climbing up to the hives.

If a skunk is found trapped in a window well, a rough board or 4 inch diameter log slowly placed into the well will allow the skunk to



Figure 2. Striped skunk tracks.

climb out. To prevent such incidents from reoccurring, window wells should be covered with wire mesh or plexiglass coverings that have been designed specifically to cover such openings.

Skunks may enter farm buildings, garages, or other structures. If this occurs exits and entrances should be left open to allow the animal to leave on its own. Harassing or disturbing cornered skunks may result in them releasing their scent.

If a skunk should spray, the odor can be neutralized using a solution containing neutrolem alpha. Contaminated clothing can be soaked in a diluted solution of household ammonia or bleach. **(Remember to never mix bleach with ammonia.)** Tomato juice, vinegar, or a number of pet deodorizers can also be used.

Skunk scent sprayed in the eyes can cause temporary blindness. Eyes should be flushed thoroughly with water if this occurs.

CHEMICAL REPELLENTS

Currently there are no chemical repellents registered for use on skunks in Utah. Mothballs and ammonia have been used to repel skunks. However, these chemicals must be used in large quantities and replaced often to be effective. In general, repellents afford only temporary solutions.

BEHAVIORAL APPROACHES

Scare techniques or devices have not been shown to be effective in repelling skunks.

POPULATION MEASURES

When skunk damage becomes intolerable, there are several options available to remove the offending animal. These include the use of live, leghold, and conibear traps, or shooting.

Livetraps can be set at den entrances or areas frequented by skunks (Figure 3). The use of covered or concealed livetraps will reduce the chance of the skunk spraying its scent upon capture. The trap can be baited with cat food, bread and peanut butter, sardines, eggs or food scraps. Once the skunk is caught, a canvas or plastic tarp can be placed over the trap during transportation. Your local animal shelter or a licensed pest control business may be willing to dispose of the skunk for you.

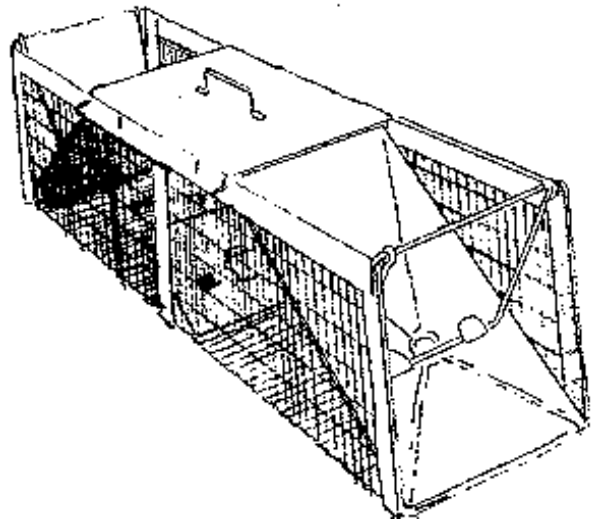


Figure 3. A live trap.

Releasing a trapped skunk into another area is not recommended, due to the potential for transmitting diseases to wild skunk populations. In addition, a problem skunk from one area is likely to become a problem skunk in the release area.

No. 1, 1 ½ and 2 size leghold traps are very effective for trapping skunks. Since skunks are not trap shy, bedding the trap in the soil is not necessary. The dirt-hole or cubby-sets work well for trapping skunks.

The traps should not be staked solid but anchored by a 20 to 30-foot chain or heavy 9 gauge wire. Once the skunk is trapped it should be approached cautiously. The end of the wire or chain should be picked up and the skunk slowly led to a place where it can be disposed of.

Conibear traps are kill-type traps which will dispatch a skunk instantly, sometimes, without musk release. A No.#220 conibear trap in a bait box set has been used with good success (Figure 4).

Leghold and conibear traps are not recommended for use by non-professionals in residential areas because of risks they pose to domestic pets and children. However, in the hands of a professional, these traps can be highly selective. He sure to check local restrictions before considering the use of any of these control measures.

TOXICANTS

There are no toxicants currently registered in Utah for controlling skunks.

FUMIGANTS

There are no fumigants currently registered in Utah for controlling skunks.

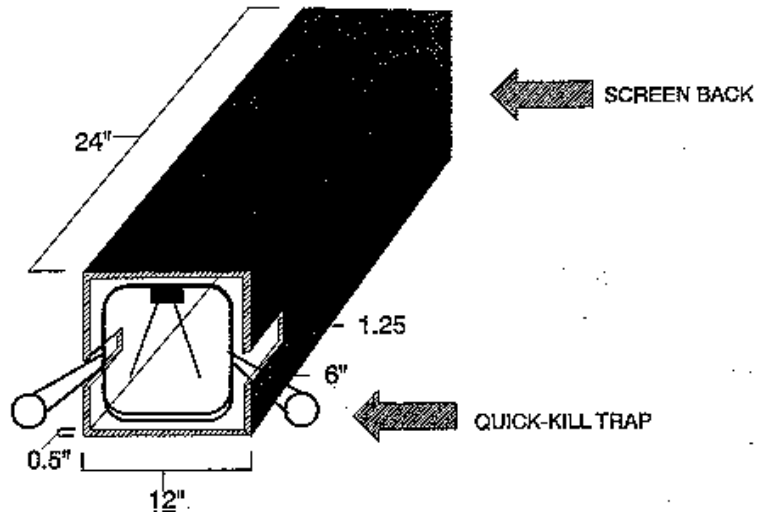


Figure 4. A conibear trap in a bait box set can be used to trap skunks. Bait should be placed in the back of the box. The box should be placed in an area that is frequented by skunks.

ADDITIONAL SOURCES OF INFORMATION

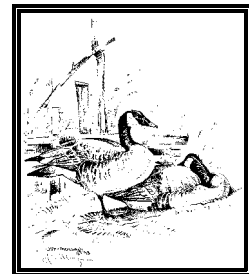
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1596 West North Temple
Salt Lake City UT 84116-3154
801-538-4700

Utah Department of Agriculture
350 North Redwood Road
Salt Lake City UT 84116
801-538-4171

USDA/APHIS Animal Damage Control
P.O. Box 26976
Salt Lake City UT 84126
(801-975-3315)

Neutroleum Alpha is available through:
Pocatello Supply Department
U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
238 Dillon Street
Pocatello ID 83201
208-326-6920

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