



Striped Skunk

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



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Striped Skunk

(*Mephitis mephitis*)

Like the Eastern spotted skunk, the striped skunk is well known for its black and white coloration and its ability to spray a smelly secretion from scent sacs located in its hind quarters. On each side of the anus is a scent gland surrounded by muscles. When alarmed, skunks contract the muscles around the gland and spray a yellowish, nauseating musk. The secretion causes momentary blindness and a terrible, lingering smell. Because of this natural “chemical weapon,” people and other animals avoid the skunk and treat it with caution.

Description

Striped skunks are about the size of a large housecat. Although the amount and location of black and white fur varies from skunk to skunk, the white fur, beginning on the top of the head, usually separates into two white stripes that run down its back. However, it is common to see striped skunks that are mostly white or mostly black along their back and do not have the traditional two stripes. The tail is long, bushy and black and white. The head is small and triangular-shaped. The skunk has small rounded ears and beady black eyes. The legs are short and the front feet are equipped with long curved claws for digging. Males are usually 10 percent larger than females.

History and Status

Today, the skunk is best known as the butt of jokes and cartoons because of its unpleasant odor. The skunk was also the subject of many Indian superstitions and myths. One explanation for the city of Chicago’s name is that it is named after an Indian word meaning “the place-of-the-skunk.” The name may be related to a Native American legend that told of a giant skunk being killed on the southwestern shore of Lake Michigan. The natives used the skunk for food and medicine.

There are four species of skunk in the world, located in North and South America. These include the striped, hooded, hog-nosed and spotted skunks. The striped skunk has 13 subspecies. The subspecies *Mephitis mephitis elongate* is found in North Carolina. This name comes from the Latin word meaning “bad odor.”

The striped skunk is classified as a game and furbearer animal in North Carolina. It can be taken during the regulated trapping and hunting season. The regulated harvest of these animals does not have a significant impact on their populations.

Habitats & Habits

Skunks live in areas with a mixture of woods, brush and open fields broken up by wooded ravines and rocky outcrops. They prefer timbered areas and pastures with good water sources. Skunks create dens by digging into slopes of hills and spend most of the day there.

They hunt and move mostly at night or early morning. Skunks do not hibernate, but, during cold weather, they become dormant and remain in the den most of the

The striped skunk is a member of the weasel family and is one of two skunk species in North Carolina.



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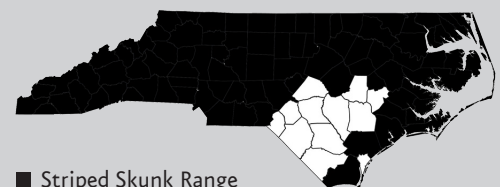


U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service

Range and Distribution

The striped skunk is found throughout the lower 48 states except in the Southwest. The striped skunk occupies most of North Carolina, although it is most common in the Mountain and Piedmont regions. It is uncommon in most of the Coastal Plain, where it did not occur historically; it is rare to absent in certain Coastal Plain counties.

Range Map



Striped Skunk

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winter. During this time their body temperature remains near normal. Several skunks may share the same winter den.

The striped skunk is an omnivore, with about 80 percent of its diet consisting of insects, worms, small rodents, bird eggs and reptiles. It also eats berries, acorns and other vegetable matter. Skunks are adept at digging and swimming. They primarily use their nose and ears to forage for food, due to poor eyesight. Skunks frequently leave evidence of their feeding: small, cone-shaped holes in the soil, where they've dug for grubs. On average, skunks live about three years in the wild. Disease and predation usually cause their deaths.

Human Interactions

Because skunks move mostly at night, many people never see them unless they are raiding a trash can or get hit by a car. If a person frightens a striped skunk, the skunk first faces the person, straightens its legs, arches its back, puts its tail straight up and bristles the tail hair to give the appearance that it is bigger than it is. It also clicks its teeth and stamps the ground. If the person or animal continues to advance, the skunk bends its body sideways in the form of a "U" so that the hindquarters face the person, then it squirts the musk. Ammonia or tomato juice help remove the odor, if you are sprayed. Carboloc soap and water are best for washing the skin.

Although skunks are seldom trapped for their fur in North Carolina, they are trapped in the northern portions of their range where their fur is finer and the black color more intense. Skunks are affected by people in other ways, through habitat destruction, car accidents and poisoning. Since skunks will eat bird eggs, they are known predators of domestic chicken eggs, as well as turkey and waterfowl eggs.

Although illegal and inhumane, skunks are often poisoned in the mistaken belief that all skunks have rabies. While skunks are one of the main carriers of rabies in North America, the chances of encountering a rabid skunk are very low and seeing a skunk out during the daytime does not mean it is diseased. Striped skunks are beneficial to the ecosystem and to people, including farmers, gardeners, and landowners, because they feed on a large number of pests, such as mice, voles, moles, beetles, worms and grubs.

How You Can Help

Skunks, like several other wild animals, can thrive in suburban and urban areas. To avoid problems with skunks, follow some basic rules:

Secure your garbage. Skunks will raid open trash materials and compost piles. Secure your garbage in tough plastic containers with tight-fitting lids and keep inside when possible. Take out trash the morning of pick up. Keep compost piles in containers designed to contain but vent the material.

- Feed pets indoors. Outdoor feeding attracts skunks and other types of wild animals.
- Close off crawl spaces under porches and sheds. Skunks will use such areas for resting and raising young. Close shed and garage doors at night, and use chicken wire to keep skunks from digging under porches.
- Protect your pet from being sprayed. Always turn on a flood light and check your yard for skunks before letting your dog out at night.
- Keep bird feeder areas clean. Use feeders designed to keep seed off the ground. Remove feeders if skunks are regularly seen around your yard.
- Educate your neighbors by passing this information along.

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Average Size

Length: 1.7-2.6 ft.

Height: 6-9 in.

Weight: males 6-14 lbs.; females 4-10 lbs.

Food

Insects, worms, small rodents, bird eggs, reptiles, fruits, acorns, seeds

Breeding/Young

Striped skunks are promiscuous; males will mate with several females. Breed between mid-February and mid-April. Males remain solitary except when mating. Gestation period is 66 to 75 days.

The young are called kits. Litter size is 5 to 9. Kits are born May to early June. Kits nurse for about 7 to 8 weeks and open their eyes at 22 days. They follow their mother on hunting trips at 2 months old and leave the family in the fall. Musk is present at birth and can be emitted at 8 days old. They are sexually mature between 1 and 2 years.

Life Expectancy

1 to 6 years in the wild.

Up to 10 years in captivity.

References

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Credits

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