Striped skunk *(Mephitis mephitis)*

Size:

20–30" long, including 10–15" tail. They weigh 6–12 pounds.

Signs of their presence:

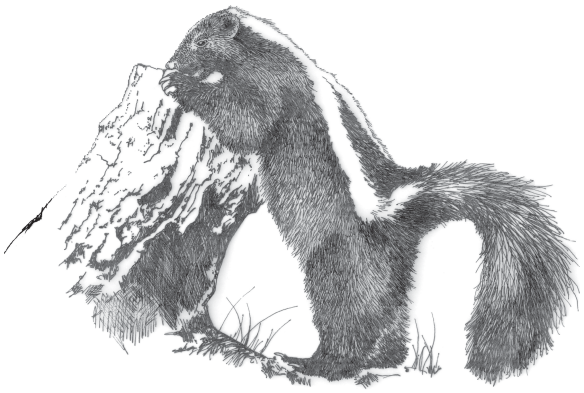
- Visual sighting of animal.
- Sounds: Adults are generally quiet, although you'll hear them stamp their feet. Young skunks are more vocal, especially when playing. You may hear teeth clicking, hissing, grunts, growls, purrs, squeals, and shrill screeches.
- Odor is nauseating, penetrating, acrid musk.
- Tracks: Small relative to body size, 5 toes on all feet, smooth continuous palm pads, long front nails.
- Scat: Scat includes mostly insect body parts, some fur, and seeds. (May be slightly curved, not shown.)
- Evidence of their feeding: Funnel-shaped holes in lawns, 3–4 inches in diameter, where skunks dig for grubs. Eggs that have been crushed at one end, with shell fragments pushed inside. (Raccoons usually remove one end of the shell without crushing it. Foxes carry eggs away. Weasels and mink crush the entire egg.) Another sign that skunks have been raiding the chicken house is if only one or two birds have been killed, because most other predators will kill several birds.

Diet:

Opportunist. Their diet changes seasonally. Skunks eat primarily insects (including ground bees and wasps), as well as earthworms, snakes, mice, moles, fruit, nuts, fish, amphibians, crustaceans, birds, eggs of birds and turtles, poultry, garbage, pet food, and carrion. They're particularly fond of grubs, and occasionally raid vegetable gardens.

Typical activity patterns:

Social style: Generally solitary, except for female with dependent young, and when denning in winter.
Daily activity: Nocturnal. During the summer, may see daytime activity, as females forage with their young. May bed down during summer in open sites away from the den.
Hibernator? Skunks sleep deeply for up to $3^{1}/_{2}$ months at a time but are not true hibernators. They'll emerge periodically during warm spells and during the mating season. Skunks den alone, or in a group of 2–7 females and 1 male. They may lose up to 38% of their body weight during the winter.
Migrates? No.



Where found:

Distribution in NY and the Northeast: Common. Can reach densities of 50 skunks/square mile in suburban areas. Less common on Long Island, but population may be increasing.
Habitat: Widespread, from coastal habitats to mature woodlands and small woodlots. Prefers open fields, lawns, and agricultural areas with areas of mixed shrubs and forest edges, near buildings, barns, or porches.
Territory and home range: Skunks rarely travel more than one mile from their den except during breeding season.

Breeding habits:

*Pair bonding style:*Polygamous. Females raise young alone. (Male skunks will kill their young.)
Breeding dates: Late February through March. Gestation takes about 62–75 days.
Birthing period: May through early June.
Litter size: 2–10, often 4–7.
Weaning dates: At 2 months old.
Amount of time young remain with parents beyond weaning date: Kits forage with their mother when they're 7 weeks old. They're independent at 3 months, and disperse in the fall.

Common nuisance situations:

Time of year: Calls peak in February and March, when they're mating. In May and June, calls are usually related to their grubbing in lawns. This picks up again in late July, continuing through mid-October. Also during that period, you may get calls about "rabid" skunks that are active during the daytime. (see explanation on next page).

What are they doing?

- Seeking a sheltered place to raise their young. They may den under porches, decks, foundations, garages, barns, or sheds.
- Stinking up the place. Skunks can be very smelly, especially from the mating season through the whelping season, if the female fights off a male. If the smell seems to come and go, and is more noticeable at dawn or dusk, or with a shift in wind direction, or seems to be coming from an area with evergreen trees, it might be the odor of a great horned owl. These owls commonly eat skunks.
- Defending themselves. Skunks are a mild-mannered, slow-moving, mind-your-own-business kind of animal. If provoked, they may spray people or pets. Their spray can reach up to 16 feet. Skunks can spray once they're 2–4 weeks old. They can spray up to six times in a row, then need a day to "recharge."
- They'll fall into window wells while searching for insects and toads, and then become trapped.
- Skunks dig in lawns for grubs. They'll sometimes scratch beehives in search of honey and insects, or raid poultry houses for eggs and chickens (but that's rare, and such damage is more likely the work of a raccoon).
- Disease risks: Rabies (they are a rabies vector species in New York), distemper.

De-bunking myths about skunks:

- A skunk that's active during the day isn't necessarily rabid. It may be a healthy female that's feeding more often than usual, because of the demands of her young.
- Adult skunks are not trigger-happy but "teenaged" skunks may be. Very young skunks squirt small amounts of fluid as they walk because they're not yet mature enough to have control of the "spray muscles." If you can "talk skunk," you can usually tell if an adult skunk intends to spray (described later).
- Grubbing by skunks is sometimes blamed on other animals because there's no skunk smell. Skunks spray in defense.

Legal status in New York:

Protected. Game species with set season. Rabies vector species, so you may need to consult with the county health department and follow their guidelines for disposing of the animal.

From ECL 11-0523: "5. Skunks injuring property or which have become a nuisance may be taken at any time in any manner."

Best practices

When dealing with skunks, a new factor enters into the choice of capture, transport, and dispatch methods—how to keep the skunk from spraying. NWCOs who have handled skunks successfully for decades advise those less experienced with handling skunks to relax. Move slowly and quietly, and don't wave your arms around. Be patient and gentle. Learn their habits and use those to your advantage.

For example, skunks like to see their targets. If they can't see, they're not likely to spray. So if you use a plastic box trap, or cover the sides of a cage trap, you'll reduce the risk of being sprayed. For a more securely covered cage trap, attach $^1/_4$" plywood to the sides and top. Leave room to reach the trigger release, and the carrying handle.

Some NWCOs have found that it's better to work with a covered trap than to cover the trap after you've caught the skunk. You may want to create a partially covered wire trap to use during hot weather, when the plastic traps could cause the skunk to overheat and die.

Here are some tips for capturing a skunk that's indoors. Set up a covered trap, and then slowly and quietly approach the skunk from behind. Guide the skunk toward the trap by gently pushing it with a broom or occasionally squirting it with water from a spray bottle.

Another option for nervous skunk handlers: don't do it! You are not required to handle all nuisance species. Some NWCOs specialize in one, or perhaps a few species, and have successful businesses. If you've spent some time with experienced skunk handlers and still don't feel your skills are adequate, consider referring customers to someone else.

Remove food sources and shelter:

- Put trash out in morning instead of the evening, if possible, or keep it in a protected area.
- Skunk-proof garbage can with a tight fitting lid, or secure it with straps.
- Don't leave pet food or their food bowls out at night.
- Enclose compost piles in a framed box using hardware cloth or welded wire; in a sturdy container, such as a 55-gallon drum; or in a commercial composter.
- Treat lawns to reduce grub populations (biological controls are preferred. In the southern part of the

state, where it's been proven to work, try Milky Spore).
- Keep mice out of buildings. Skunks eat them, and will go inside buildings looking for them.
- Remove brush piles and debris.

Protect vulnerable areas and crops:
- Close garage doors at night.
- Cover window wells. There are readily available commercial window well covers that are inexpensive.
- Close basement windows at night, and keep them in good repair.
- Fence beehives or poultry areas with 1-inch chicken wire, 1x1" or 1x2" vinyl coated or galvanized welded wire mesh, or hardware cloth ($^1/_4$" or $^1/_2$" mesh). If there's already an electric fence, add a wire at 5" off the ground. Or place the hives 3 feet off the ground.

Keep them from denning under buildings:
If this is a preventive action, or there are no young present, can:
- First, ensure that the skunks have left the den. Close all of the entrances to the den except the main hole. You can place a one-way door over that hole for 3–4 days to give the skunks time to leave, or use the soft plug method. Sprinkle flour, talc, or nontoxic tracking powder on the ground inside the den area near the hole, then cover the hole with hardware cloth. Return the next day to check for tracks. Once you're sure the skunks are gone, you can permanently seal the hole.
- Screen areas under decks, porches, and houses (foundation skirt) with a "rat wall". Use 1x1" or 1x2" vinyl coated welded wire mesh or hardware cloth ($^1/_4$" or $^1/_2$" mesh). The fence must be buried 3–6" deep, with the bottom edge bent outward at 90° into a "L" shape that sticks out 6–12" to prevent the skunks from burrowing underneath it. If you can't bury the fence, the 90° bend extending along the ground can be effective. This design also works for a freestanding fence. If the top isn't attached to the deck or porch, the fence should be 3 feet high.
- Skunks can squeeze through small openings in buildings. Seal any hole or crack that's 3–4 inches across with sheet metal, concrete, or hardware cloth.

If young are present, remove or evict the entire family before blocking the entrance to their den:
- Trap and release strategies to reduce the risk of orphaning wildlife: The best way to prevent orphaning is to convince your customers to wait until the young are mobile before removing, repelling, or excluding the family from the site. If that's unacceptable, you can try to capture and remove both the female and all of her young and hope that she will retrieve them and continue to care for them. Some NWCOs are trying to refine removal techniques to increase the chances that the female will retrieve her young. Here are their suggestions.
- Capture the mother and young. Release them on-site, at dusk or in the evening.
- Place the female and young in a release box. Many NWCOs use a simple cardboard box, others use a wooden nest box, such as a wood duck box, and some prefer plastic boxes. Match the size of the box and its entrance hole to the size of the species. (One NWCO recommends a 2x2x1 ft. box.)
- Make sure the animal cannot immediately get out of the box by covering the hole. Then move them to a quiet place outdoors. Unless they're likely to be disturbed, keep the box at ground level. Remove the cover so the female can get out of the box. Another option is to build a box with a sliding door. Leave the door open about an inch, to keep the heat inside but make it easy for the female to slide it fully open so she can retrieve her young.
- Some NWCOs prefer to use heated release boxes. Use heat only when appropriate, and make sure that the box doesn't get too hot. You may want to provide heat in just one area. Also, assume that if you put something in the box, they will chew on it. Don't give them access to anything that they shouldn't eat, such as wires. That means that if you choose to use a household heating pad as the heat source, make sure the animals can't reach the wires. To avoid that problem, one NWCO builds his boxes with a double floor, placing the heating pad in the space between the floors. Other options for heat sources include microwaveable heating pads and warm soapstones.
- If you can't catch the female, put the young in the release box and locate it as close to the entry site as possible.
- Check the next day to see if the young are still there. If so, they've probably been abandoned. There hasn't yet been enough research on this technique, so its effectiveness is unknown. Cover the hole to the den with a soft plug to make sure that no skunks are still using it before permanently sealing the hole.
- If the young are older and mobile, install a one-way door over the entry hole. They'll leave but won't be

able to re-enter. Wait 3–4 days before sealing the entry permanently.

How to avoid being sprayed:

- Skunks give a warning before they spray. They turn to face the aggressor, arch their backs, raise their tails, stamp the ground, and shuffle backwards. Then, just before spraying, they bend into a "U" shape, so both their head and tail faces the target. Should you see any of these signals, back away slowly and quietly, and don't wave your arms around.
- Take precautions before letting dogs out at night, or keep them on leashes and maintain control.

And how to get rid of that lovely "eau de skunk":

- First, ventilate the area.
- A mix of equal parts of tomato juice and vinegar will clean a dog, but most people don't realize that you'd have to soak your pet for an hour—and then wash with soap. Here's an easier recipe, developed by chemist Dr. Paul Krebaum:
    - 1 quart of 3% hydrogen peroxide
    - $^1/_4$ cup baking soda
    - 1 teaspoon liquid soap

  Mix ingredients together and immediately wash your pet, or soak your clothing, while the solution is bubbling. Rinse. **Don't try to bottle this mix because it generates a lot of oxygen and could explode.**
- To clean clothing or objects, two household products will work: ammonia or bleach (oxygen or chlorine bleach). You must choose one OR the other. *Don't mix them because together, they form toxic fumes.* So, either pour a little ammonia into water, or a little bleach into the water. Soak the clothes for several hours, then wash as usual. You may have to wash the clothes a few times, and there may be some discoloration. You could also try Dr. Krebaum's recipe, listed above.
- There are many commercial deodorizers that can neutralize or mask the odor.

Trapping strategies:

Live traps:

- Cage trap should be 9x9x24" for a single door model, longer for a double door model.
- Bait with commercial fruit-based bait or peanut butter (sardines and cat food are effective but will also attract cats).
- The skunk will be calmer if it enters a dark space. Use a plastic box trap, except during hot weather, or cover the sides of a cage trap with boards.
- Foothold trap, #1 or $1^1/_2$ (double-jawed traps preferred, but can also use standard jaw or laminated traps), or the Lil Grizz Get'rz™, Duffer™, or EGG™ foot encapsulating traps designed for raccoons.
- How to get a skunk out of a window well. Skunks are poor climbers. Many people will suggest placing a board in the well to allow the skunk to climb out on its own, but this will only work if the window well is large enough so the board can be placed at a shallow angle of less than 45° (if you try this, give the skunk some traction by nailing a few boards or some cleats across the board). Unfortunately, most window wells are too small for this technique. Instead, try restraining the skunk with a Cat Grasper™ (akin to a catchpole) and then lifting it out, or place a small cage trap or small cardboard box in the well and guide the skunk into it using a long stick. Work calmly and you should be able to remove the skunk without being sprayed.

Lethal traps:

- Body-gripping trap, #120, #160, or #220 preferably in a restricted opening set that reduces the risk to dogs and cats (vertical cubby, bucket with restricted opening, or a deep-notch box set). The skunk may spray. See chapter five for details about these sets, and other tips that reduce the risk of capturing an unintended animal, such as the use of a one-way trigger.
- Modify the trigger to help ensure a top-to-bottom strike (which is more humane) and to prevent the skunk from refusing to enter the trap. Skunks don't like to have anything brush against their eyes or whiskers, so separate the trigger and center it on the top or bottom of the trap. Proper positioning helps to ensure a cleaner, more humane catch.

Preferred killing methods:

- The skunk will probably spray, so be prepared
- CO_2 chamber (let the animal settle down before turning on the gas, and use a lower flow rate to avoid frightening the animal)
- Lethal trap
- Lethal injection of barbiturate, if possible
- Shooting, using a shotgun with #6 shot or a .22 caliber rifle (target the head, if no rabies testing is needed, or the heart/lungs. The skunk will almost certainly spray if you use the head shot.)

Acceptable killing methods:

- Stunning followed by chest compression. The skunk will probably spray, so be prepared.

A conventional killing method that's under debate:
Some people inject acetone into skunks to kill them. This method looks good from the outside. The skunk seems to "just go to sleep," falling over quietly, then dying. There aren't any signs of struggle, discomfort, or pain and the skunk rarely sprays.

Unfortunately, there's no scientific data to adequately explain how acetone injections kill skunks. You'll hear opinions both for and against this method. If acetone is as bad as some people believe, then why don't the skunks spray? And even if it is traumatic, if it reliably kills skunk as quickly as some people report, could it still qualify as a best practice?

We prefer facts—and although we tried hard, we didn't get satisfactory answers. So for right now, we can't say "yes" or "no." For those who have used this method, that may sound awfully wishy-washy. Why not trust your eyes? (Like wildlife biologists, successful NWCOs are careful observers of wildlife behavior. In fact, to use the best practices method, you must make decisions based on what you see, smell, and hear.)

Consider the drug, succinylcholine hydrochloride, which was once used to immobilize animals. This drug paralyzes muscles, so the animal would be quiet and unable to move—but it was fully alert and able to feel pain. (Some people volunteered to take the drug so they could describe the experience, which they said was painful and frightening.) This drug is no longer recommended for immobilizing wildlife.

Kind? Cruel? You may not be able to tell just by watching. We recommend you choose a method that is well understood, one that has been properly studied.

Control methods that don't work well, or aren't legal in New York:

- No toxicants or fumigants are registered for skunks in New York.
- Moth balls aren't registered for this use, and could be dangerous to people if used in the quantity that would be needed.
- Other repellents haven't worked against skunks.