



Striped Skunk

Mephitis mephitis



The striped skunk (Mephitis mephitis) is a highly adaptable animal that can be found in a wide variety of habitats, from open fields to urban areas. It is well known for its ability to spray an unpleasant scent to ward off potential threats.

Vermont Wildlife Fact Sheet

Physical Description

The striped skunk is about the size of a house cat, reaching a length of 25 to 32 inches and weighing between three and fourteen pounds. The male is generally larger than the female. It has small, beady black eyes, a pointed nose, and a bushy tail but its most distinctive feature is its coloration. Its coat is uniformly black with a broad white stripe running down its back. The stripe is a single line at the skunk's head, but splits into two as it continues down the back to its tail, forming a V in appearance.

This coloration is thought to be a warning to other animals. Animals that ignore this warning run the risk of being sprayed. The scent glands are located at the base of the tail, so when the skunk is preparing to spray, it will raise its tail straight up in the air and begin making a hissing sound. Besides the strong odor, the spray can temporarily blind an attacker by making its eyes water. Skunk musk also can cause an intense fear in the victim which may be triggered in later years by a

musky odor. It is capable of spraying at distances of 15 feet.

Life Cycle

Breeding occurs from February through late March. The male will mate with more than one female in a breeding season, but the female will mate with only one male. She will then build a nest. It will be under a wood pile, dig a den in a bank, or inhabit an abandoned den from another animal, like a woodchuck's burrow.

After a gestation period of approximately 63 days, the young are born in late April to early June. Litter size varies from two to ten young, with the average being six to seven. The young are born sightless and covered with fur that already has the tell-tale markings. The female is protective of her young, even carrying them around in her mouth. After four weeks, the young open their eyes. Weaning occurs from six to eight weeks of age. The female raises the young, and it is not uncommon to see the family out feeding on a summer night. The young leave home in the fall, or following spring, to

breed and raise a family of their own. The female skunk becomes sexually mature at the age of one year.

Food Items

The striped skunk is an omnivore, eating both plants and animals. It is an opportunist by nature, depending on the season and food availability. Its diet includes insects, beetles, crickets, grasshoppers, small mammals, birds, eggs, vegetation and garbage. The striped skunk's willingness to eat garbage has allowed it to spread into towns and cities.

The skunk forages at night aggressively searching out food guided by its strong sense of smell. It will hunt for insects or burrowing animals by digging.

Habits & Habitat

Striped skunks are found in a variety of habitats, including fields, open areas, and along the edges of forests. They are abundant in agricultural areas, which provide a stable and abundant food supply. They can also be found in wetlands and

along beaches. Striped skunks have become adapted to life among people and are common in small rural towns to large urban cities. For rearing the young, skunks require dens, using ones they have built themselves or abandoned by another animal. They may make dens under houses.

Striped skunks are most active from sunset to sunrise, thus they are considered to be both crepuscular and nocturnal. Striped skunks are not true hibernators, but will den and become inactive during long stretches of cold weather. They may share a den at this time to conserve body heat; a den may contain a few females and a single male. Usually solitary, this may be the only time when a male and female would be together other than during the breeding season.

As striped skunks are not adept climbers or fast runners, they defend themselves by spraying their attackers with an oily, foul smelling musk. In addition to the pungent odor, the liquid can cause severe pain and even temporary blindness. When threatened, skunks will generally face the intruder, arch their back, raise their tail, and move backwards while stamping their feet. Skunks can spray a scent up to 15 feet, but the smell can carry up to a mile.

Because striped skunks are so abundant, their populations often susceptible to diseases, such as rabies. Rabid skunks are dangerous and should be avoided. Their behavior is much different from that of healthy skunks. Some characteristics of infected skunks are activity during the day, aggression, or being unlikely to

spray. An animal control officer should be contacted, so that the animal can be properly dealt with.

Abundance

Skunks are a common in Vermont. Their populations fluctuate from year to year, depending on food availability, seasonal and climatic conditions and disease.

History

In the 1930s and 1940s, skunk pelts were in great demand and, although a market still exists, it is not as valuable as it once was.

Resource Utilization

Striped skunks are extremely helpful in controlling agricultural pests. They eat large quantities of insects such as cutworms, grasshoppers, and potato beetles, that otherwise could damage crops. Skunks are also trapped for their fur. They are still considered an important furbearer throughout their range.

Management Efforts

The striped skunk population is monitored closely to regulate hunting and trapping limits. In Vermont, it is protected from over harvesting with the trapping season only lasting two months, from the end of October through the end of December. This time of year is chosen to protect against mothers or newborns being harvested.

Illustration by J.J. Audubon