



# Coping With Skunks

Fact Sheet No. 6.500

Natural Resources Series | Wildlife

By M. Cerato & W.F. Andelt  
Revised by K.M. Jones (12/16)

Skunks belong to the weasel family (Mustelidae) and possess one of that family's key characteristics—scent glands. If a skunk is not recognized by sight, it can certainly be discerned by the sulfurous musk it sprays in self-defense.

There are four species of skunks in Colorado: striped (*Mephitis mephitis*), hog-nosed (*Conepatus mesoleucus*), western spotted (*Spilogale gracilis*), and eastern spotted (*Spilogale putorius*).



## Biology and Behavior

All four species of skunks are omnivorous, their diets include insects, vegetation, small rodents, eggs, and garbage. All four species have five toes and claws on their front and hind feet for digging.

Skunks generally den in burrows of other animals, rock crevices, brush piles, or spaces under buildings, but sometimes they dig their own burrows. Their home range averages 0.5 to 1.5 square miles but may increase up to 5 square miles during the breeding season.

The striped skunk is present throughout Colorado and can be found in elevations up to 10,000 feet. Similar in size to house cats, it weighs 4 to 10 pounds and is 1.9 to

2.5 feet long. Its body is black except for a white stripe on the forehead and a wide white area at the nape of the neck that divides into a "V" along the back. The striped skunk is a prolific breeder.

The hog-nosed skunk is found in small numbers in the pinon-juniper woodlands of southeastern Colorado. It weighs the same as the striped skunk, but its body and tail tends to be slightly longer. As the name suggests, this skunk has a turned-up nose like a hog. The back of its head and the entire back and tail are white, whereas the face, sides and underside are black. It has not been reported to Colorado Parks and Wildlife in the last half-century in Colorado and may not be located here any longer.

The eastern spotted skunk is rare and is occasionally found in the plains along Colorado's eastern border. This skunk has 4 to 6 broken white stripes on its back, long dense black fur, and a single white spot on its forehead. The eastern spotted skunk also has a black-tipped tail which generally is shorter than the tails of other skunks. This skunk ranges in length from 1.3 to 1.9 feet and weighs 15.8 ounces to 1.9 pounds. The eastern spotted skunk is also unique in its ability to climb trees.

The western spotted skunk is also not very common, mainly occurring in the foothills and canyons of western Colorado (usually below 8,000 ft.). It can be distinguished from the eastern spotted skunk by its white tipped tail and the broader broken white stripes on its back. The western spotted skunk also has a spot between its eyes, but its body is slightly smaller than the eastern spotted skunk. It measures approximately 1.1 to 1.6 feet long and weighs 14 ounces to 1.5 pounds.

Use extra care when handling spotted skunks because they are more easily excited than striped and hog-nosed skunks and release a more pungent scent.

Skunks usually breed once a year in February or March and bear young in early May. Litter sizes vary from two to 10, depending on the species and age of the female. The kit's eyes open approximately



## Quick Facts

- Skunks dig holes in lawns and golf courses, eat garden produce, prey on poultry and waterfowl, damage beehives, den under buildings, are a host for rabies, and spray musk.
- To reduce problems with skunks, remove rubbish piles, store garbage and pet foods in sealed cans, seal foundation openings, spray insecticides on lawns to reduce grubs, install fences, or capture skunks with live traps.
- Use alkaline hydrogen peroxide or a diluted solution of vinegar to remove skunk odor from pets and clothing.

M. Cerato, Fort Collins, CO 80525; and W.F. Andelt, Colorado State University Cooperative Extension wildlife specialist and professor, fishery and wildlife biology. Revised (12/2016) by K.M. Jones, Chaffee County Extension Director.



two to four weeks after birth and depending on the species, are able to spray musk about one to six weeks after birth.

Bobcats, coyotes, foxes, mountain lions, great horned owls, and other animals prey on skunks but not as a primary food source. Skunks are often hit by cars, trapped for their fur, and sometimes eliminated when they become pests. Although skunks are beneficial because they eat insects and rodents, they can become pests when their activities conflict with human activities.

Skunks are nocturnal and reclusive. Use extra caution if you encounter a skunk during the day or one that is extremely aggressive. This abnormal behavior may indicate that the animal is rabid. The occurrence of rabid skunks appears highest from February to May, when they breed and give birth to their young.

According to the Centers for Disease Control, 1,588 cases of rabies in skunks were reported in the United States during 2014. Skunks in Colorado were diagnosed with rabies during this reporting period. Even with this low number, precautions should always be taken to avoid being bitten because rabies is a virus that causes a fatal swelling of the brain if not treated early. If bitten, the following steps should be taken:

- 1) Retain the skunk, (dead or alive), if possible to do so without further injury. If the skunk is dead, keep it refrigerated or on ice.

- 2) Wash the wound thoroughly with soap and water.

- 3) Call the local animal control department to pick up the skunk and have it tested for rabies.

- 4) See your doctor as soon as possible (no later than 72 hours). Get a tetanus shot if you have not had one in the last 10 years.

- 5) If the skunk is available for testing, the rabies test results will determine if you need a rabies vaccine. If the skunk is not available, then you should get the rabies vaccine as a prophylactic measure.

## Damage

Skunks may dig holes under buildings or enter them through openings in the foundation. This is of concern because of the possible smell and because skunks are a major host for rabies.

Skunks may also cause damage by digging in lawns, gardens, and golf courses

while looking for grubs. This digging usually results in small 3- to 4-inch cone-shaped holes or patches of upturned earth. They eat fruits and vegetables, prey on poultry and eggs, and disturb beehives. In areas where agricultural practices have reduced nesting cover, skunks can have a significant impact on waterfowl and upland game bird populations by preying on eggs.

## Control

### Preventive Measures

The best control for problems with skunks is to:

- Remove lumber and junk piles.
- Store garbage in tightly sealed cans.
- Clean up pet foods.
- Use insecticides to control grubs in turf.
- Elevate beehives about 3 feet and place a smooth sheet of metal at the base to make them inaccessible.
- Install fencing that extends 1 to 2 feet below ground and seal foundation openings to prevent skunks from denning under buildings.

### Repellents

If a skunk is found under a building, encourage it to leave by placing generous amounts of mothballs in cloth bags, or ammonia-soaked cloths under the building. Attach the bags or cloths to a string so they can be removed later.

To determine if the animal has left, sprinkle a layer of flour at the entrance to make the direction of the tracks visible. Because skunks are nocturnal, check the area for tracks a few hours after dark or early morning. Once the animal is gone, seal the entrance to prevent further occurrences.

If there is doubt regarding how many skunks are under the building, use a one-way, 1/4-inch hardware cloth door. The door, hinged at the top, should extend beyond the entrance and outward at the base at a right angle for about 6 inches. This design enables skunks to push their way out, but their weight on the door prevents them from re-entering.

### Elimination

In some instances, preventive methods and repellents are not sufficient and elimination of the skunk may be neces-

sary. In urban areas, capture and removal may be done by a commercial pest control operator, the homeowner, or an animal control officer. Check local ordinances before using any control method.

The Colorado Division of Wildlife does not require a permit to kill skunks on private land if it is essential for safety and property protection. However, restrictions have been placed on the use of certain capture methods.

### Live-Trapping

Capture skunks in 24 x 7 x 7 inch or larger live trap baited with fish-flavored cat food, sardines, eggs, or peanut butter. Use peanut butter if cats and raccoons might also be caught. Place the trap near the den entrance and cover the sides with a tarp to reduce the chance of the skunk spraying musk.

If you must move the trap, approach it quietly and move it gently with the tarp on it to prevent the skunk from becoming excited and spraying. State regulations require that traps are checked at least once a day.

If you trap a striped skunk, state regulations do not allow you to relocate or transport it. The striped skunk must be released at the site of capture or it must be destroyed. Spotted and hognosed skunks may be relocated after obtaining a permit from the Colorado Division of Wildlife. Because these two species are protected, you may call the Colorado Division of Wildlife at (303) 297-1192 for help in confirming identification and/or obtaining recommendations for relocating them.

Some animal control officers or pest control contractors might trap and/ or destroy the skunk for you. If you decide to handle the problem yourself, skunks may be killed by shooting (where permitted), using a CO chamber, or by having a veterinarian administer a euthanasia solution. Car exhaust is no longer considered humane or effective for killing skunks. Shooting is discouraged because the skunk usually releases its odor. Be sure to check city and county ordinances for additional regulations that may apply.

### Shooting

Skunks may be shot in rural areas but not near buildings or any area of public concentration. Artificial light may be used while shooting striped skunks at night

on public land with a permit from the Colorado Division of Wildlife. No permit is needed on private land. The light source should not be from within or permanently attached to a vehicle and shooting may not occur within 500 yards of buildings. Shooting is discouraged because the skunk often will release musk.

## Spray and Odor Removal

Unless surprised suddenly, a skunk will give obvious warning signals before it sprays. It will arch its back, stamp its front feet, and shuffle backwards. Finally, the skunk will raise its tail, bend its body to a U-shaped position, and release musk. This musk is a sulfur-alcohol compound and can be extremely nauseating. Severe burning, tears, and temporary blindness (10 to 15 minutes) may occur if the musk gets in the eyes. Rinse eyes with water to reduce discomfort.

Alkaline hydrogen peroxide is a very effective deodorizing solution consisting of 1 quart 3 percent hydrogen peroxide (from a drugstore), 1/4 cup baking soda (sodium bicarbonate), and 1 teaspoon liquid soap. It is one of the best solutions to help eliminate odor on pets, people, clothing, or residential areas that have been sprayed. Pets bathed with alkaline hydrogen peroxide should then be rinsed thoroughly with tap water. A solution of 2 percent vinegar and 98 percent water may also help eliminate odor from pets, clothing, and possessions. Avoid contact with the eyes when using these solutions.

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