



Wildlife Information Guide

STRIPED SKUNK (*Mephitis mephitis*)

DESCRIPTION

The Striped Skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) is a medium-sized carnivore native to North America and the most recognizable member of the family Mephitidae. These distinctive mammals are easily identified by their characteristic black and white coloration and are found throughout New Hampshire and the United States in various habitats.

PHYSICAL CHARACTERISTICS

Stripe Patterns Individual stripe patterns are unique to each skunk, similar to human fingerprints. The stripes typically begin with a triangular patch on the head, separate into two distinct stripes along the back, and may rejoin at the tail base. Some individuals exhibit broader or narrower stripes, and occasionally, nearly all-black or all-white variations occur. **Habitat Preferences** Striped skunks are highly adaptable and thrive in diverse habitats including suburban areas, agricultural fields, open woodlands, and brush-lands. They prefer areas with mixed cover providing both foraging opportunities and denning sites. In New Hampshire, they are commonly found in residential areas with mature shade trees and open lawns.

BEHAVIOR

Striped skunks are primarily nocturnal and crepuscular, becoming active during twilight hours and throughout the night. They are generally solitary except during mating season and winter denning periods. **Social Structure** Skunks exhibit a flexible social system that varies seasonally. During breeding season, males may associate briefly with females but provide no parental care. In winter, particularly in northern climates like New Hampshire, multiple females may share a den with a single male, or several females may den together for thermal regulation.

Activity Patterns

- Nocturnal: Most active 2-3 hours after sunset
- Seasonal Variation: Less active during coldest winter months but do not hibernate
- Territorial Behavior: Maintain loose home ranges of 1-2 square miles that may overlap with others.

Movement and Locomotion Skunks are slow-moving mammals with a distinctive



waddling gait. They are capable of brief bursts of speed up to 10 mph when threatened but typically move deliberately while foraging. They are excellent diggers and competent climbers when necessary. **Den Site Selection** Skunks utilize various den sites including abandoned woodchuck burrows, hollow logs, rock crevices, and spaces under buildings. They may excavate their own burrows but often prefer to modify existing structures. Multiple dens are maintained within their home range.

Communication Skunks communicate through various methods including scent marking, vocalizations (chattering, hissing, growling), and visual displays. Scent glands on their feet mark travel routes and territory boundaries.

REPRODUCTION

Striped skunks follow a predictable annual reproductive cycle with breeding occurring in late winter and birth in late spring. **Breeding Season** Mating typically occurs from February through early March in New Hampshire, with peak activity during the first warm days of late winter. Males emerge from winter dens earlier than females to establish territories and search for mates. **Mating System** Skunks practice a polygynous mating system where males mate with multiple females during the breeding season. Males may travel considerable distances seeking receptive females and compete with other males for mating opportunities.

Gestation and Delayed Implantation

- Delayed Implantation: Approximately 19 days
- Active Gestation: 59-68 days
- Total Pregnancy Duration: 77-87 days

Birth and Litter Characteristics

- Birth Timing: Late May to early June in New Hampshire
- Litter Size: 4-8 kits (average 6)
- Birth Weight: 15-20 grams per kit
- Development: Born blind, deaf, and helpless with minimal fur

Kit Development

- Eyes Open: 21-24 days
- First Emergence: 6-8 weeks
- Weaning: 8-10 weeks
- Independence: 10-12 weeks
- Family Dispersal: Late summer/early fall

Maternal Care Females are solely responsible for raising young. Mothers are extremely protective and will move litters if dens are disturbed. Kits remain with the mother through summer, learning foraging techniques and predator avoidance.



DIET

Striped skunks are opportunistic omnivores with diet composition varying seasonally based on food availability. They play an important ecological role as both predators and scavengers.

Primary Food Categories

- Insects: 60-70% of diet during warm months, including beetles, grasshoppers, crickets, and grubs
- Small Mammals: Mice, voles, shrews, and occasionally rats
- Eggs and Birds: Ground-nesting bird eggs, young birds, and poultry when available
- Vegetation: Fruits, berries, nuts, and agricultural crops
- Carrion: Dead animals of various sizes

Seasonal Dietary Patterns

- Spring: Emphasis on insects, small mammals, and emerging vegetation
- Summer: Peak insect consumption, supplemented with fruits and berries
- Fall: Increased consumption of nuts, fruits, and small mammals to build fat reserves
- Winter: Reduced feeding activity, relying on fat stores and available carrion

Foraging Behavior Skunks are methodical foragers, using their excellent sense of smell and hearing to locate food. They dig for insects and grubs, creating small conical holes in lawns and gardens. Their strong claws and snouts are well-adapted for excavating soil invertebrates. **Agricultural Impact** Skunks provide significant pest control benefits by consuming large quantities of agricultural pests including Japanese beetles, cutworms, and various crop-damaging insects. However, they may also damage lawns and gardens while foraging. **Prey Handling** Skunks kill small mammals with quick bites to the head or neck. They may cache excess food in dens during abundant periods, though this behavior is less pronounced than in other carnivores.

DEFENSIVE MECHANISMS

The striped skunk's defensive strategies are among the most distinctive in the animal kingdom, centered around their infamous ability to spray noxious musk. The skunk's primary defensive mechanism is musk spraying. **Musk Composition** The musk is produced by two scent glands located on either side of the anus, containing sulfur-containing compounds (thiols) that create the characteristic odor. The musk is stored in muscular sacs capable of holding approximately one tablespoon of fluid.

Spray Characteristics

- Range: Accurate up to 12-15 feet
- Spray Pattern: Can be directed as a stream or atomized spray
- Volume: Multiple discharges possible before glands are depleted
- Replenishment: 7-10 days required for full musk reproduction



Warning Behaviors Before spraying, skunks display a series of escalating warning behaviors:

1. Arched Back: Back arched with tail raised high
2. Foot Stamping: Rapid stamping of front feet
3. Hissing and Growling: Vocal warnings
4. False Charges: Short rushes toward the threat
5. Handstand Position: Rearing up on front legs (young skunks)
6. Tail Positioning: Tail raised and curved over back, aimed at threat

Spray Deployment When warnings are ignored, skunks can spray while facing away from the threat, accurately hitting targets behind them. The musk causes temporary blindness, nausea, and intense discomfort in potential predators.

Secondary Defenses

1. Warning Coloration (Aposematism) The distinctive black and white pattern serves as a visual warning to potential predators, advertising their defensive capabilities.
2. Nocturnal Activity Nighttime activity reduces encounters with diurnal predators, though it increases vulnerability to owls, which have poor senses of smell and are their primary natural predator.
3. Threat Assessment Skunks are generally tolerant of human presence and many other animals, spraying only when they feel directly threatened or cornered.
4. Burrowing Ability Strong digging capabilities allow skunks to quickly excavate hiding places or escape routes when threatened.

Predator Relationships Most predators avoid skunks due to their defensive capabilities. Primary predators include great horned owls (which have limited smell), occasionally coyotes and foxes (typically juveniles or desperate individuals), and vehicles (major source of mortality).

HUMAN-SKUNK INTERACTIONS

Skunks often come into contact with humans due to their adaptability to suburban environments and their attraction to human-provided food sources and shelter opportunities.

Common Conflict Scenarios

- Denning under porches, decks, and outbuildings
- Foraging in garbage cans and pet food
- Damaging lawns while searching for grubs
- Threatening pets and children
- Carrier of rabies and other diseases

Disease Concerns Skunks are known carriers of rabies; therefore, any skunks observed behaving abnormally or sickly should be avoided. Signs of illness include disorientation,



impaired movement, paralysis, unprovoked aggression, unusual vocalizations, excess salivation, and abnormally friendly behavior adaptations

MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS

Effective skunk management requires understanding their behavior, biology, and the specific circumstances leading to human-wildlife conflicts. Management strategies should emphasize prevention, habitat modification, and when necessary, professional removal services.

SCIENTIFIC REFERENCES

1. University of New Hampshire. (2022). UNH Researcher Examines The Importance of the Lowly Skunk. UNH Today. <https://www.unh.edu/unhtoday/2022/12/importance-lowly-skunk>
2. NH PBS NatureWorks: Striped Skunk. (2024). <https://nhpbs.org/wild/stripedskunk.asp>
3. WildlifeHelp.org. (2024). How to deal with problem Skunk in New Hampshire. <https://wildlifehelp.org/animals/new-hampshire/skunk>
4. SUNY College of Environmental Science and Forestry. (2024). Striped Skunk. Adirondack Ecological Center. https://www.esf.edu/aec/adks/mammals/striped_skunk.php
5. New York State Department of Environmental Conservation. (2024). Striped Skunk. <https://dec.ny.gov/nature/animals-fish-plants/striped-skunk>
6. Vermont Fish & Wildlife Department. (2024). Striped Skunk. <https://vtfishandwildlife.com/learn-more/vermont-critters/mammals/striped-skunk>
7. Indiana Department of Natural Resources. (2024). DNR: Fish & Wildlife: Striped Skunk. <https://www.in.gov/dnr/fish-and-wildlife/wildlife-resources/animals/striped-skunk/>
8. New Mexico State University. (2024). New Mexico Skunks: Identification, Ecology, and Damage Management. <https://pubs.nmsu.edu/1/L214/index.html>

This document represents current scientific understanding of striped skunk biology and behavior as of 2025. Information should be used in conjunction with local wildlife management guidelines and regulations.

