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PEST PRESS

IPM in Schools National Coalition "HUG A BUG!"

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Striped Skunk Management

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A Note About Skunks from Allen

I have a good sized creek (Rocky Fork) that cuts through my property and the vast adjacent wooded areas owned by the city of Gahanna, here in Ohio. My family and I are accustomed to seeing all types of wildlife on our property, including: ducks, deer, hawks, herons, geese, owls, opossums, raccoons, and the occasional snake. Although not as common as seeing (our frequent) raccoons in the backyard, there is never a doubt when a skunk is nearby due to their "tell tale" omnipresent odor. You always know when "Pepe' Le Pew" is around the area.

Skunks are truly beautiful animals with their slender face, bushy tails, and distinct coloration and markings. Some people have even turned young skunks into pets having their scent glands removed **(however, please note: departments of wildlife frown upon any wild animals that are kept as pets, and you must have a permit and the animal must come from a licensed propagator)**. Skunks are also very beneficial to humankind by keeping rodent populations down and by eating various agricultural insect pests.

However, skunks are primarily feared by people due to their ability to discharge an oily liquid spray that is obnoxious to our sense of smell. Skunks have two scent glands located next to the anus. When they feel threatened they contract the muscles around these glands to discharge their spray. Skunks can discharge this defensive spray over 15 feet and more accurately from a distance up to 10 feet. This odor is also difficult to remove once you or your pet has been sprayed.

Skunks can also be urban pests: digging up lawns and play grounds looking for grubs and other insects, tipping over trash cans and raiding trash dumpsters, and they may even decide to create a den under porches, concession stands, garages, tool sheds or other out buildings, and in and around your schools or facilities foundations.

Skunks: General Characteristics

Skunks are mammals that belong to the order of **Carnivora** and the family **Mephitidae**. They are nocturnal animals for the most part and can be active throughout the year. They may sleep during severely cold winter months, but they do not truly hibernate.

The natural habitat for skunks (depending on the species and location) is within wooded areas and forests, grassy plains, fields, and croplands usually located near a water source, such as: lakes, marshes, ponds, swamps, creeks, streams, and rivers. Their natural dwellings include: hollow logs, stumps and trees, as well as voids in cliffs and rock crevices, and rock piles. Skunks also burrow into the ground to construct dens. Although they belong to the order carnivora, skunks are truly omnivores, eating a variety of foods.

In the wild, typical food sources include: beetles, crickets, grasshoppers, and other insect grubs, ground squirrels, mice, moles, shrews, rats, and other small animals. They will also eat wild berries, fruits and plants.

It is estimated (and debated) that there are 10 to 12 species of skunks worldwide. In the western hemisphere, skunks may be found from Canada to South America. In North America, there are 5 different species of skunks within 3 genres: the Eastern Spotted Skunk, Western Spotted Skunk, Hooded Skunk, Hognose Skunk, and the Striped Skunk.

The two most common skunks in America are the Spotted Skunk *(Spilogale putorius)* and the Striped Skunk *(Mephitis mephitis)*. These two species are also the most common pests within the USA.

The Striped Skunk

Striped Skunk: File photograph, Minnesota Department of Natural Resources. Permission granted for use by Deborah Rose.

The Striped Skunk (*Mephitis mephitis)* can be found in most of the 48 continental states. They are easily recognized by their shiny thick black fur and their contrasting white stripes. The stripes start as a singular narrow stripe that is centered on the muzzle and then broadens at the top of the head. The stripe splits laterally across the back forming a V shaped pattern and comes back together to blend in with the tail. They have a slender nose and a bushy tail. A striped skunks body size ranges from 19 to 24 inches in approximate length. Adults are roughly the size of a large house cat. The approximate weight range for a striped skunk is 2 to 6 pounds.

Mating season occurs during the late winter months and with newborn arrivals in May and June. Striped skunks produce 1 litter per year within which the litter size may yield from 2 to 10 newborns. Young striped skunks leave the nest in approximately 7 to 9 weeks.

Skunks as Confident Invaders & Urban Pests

As human kind expands and develops fields and wooded areas into business parks, residential areas, shopping malls, and schools we find ourselves more frequently "face to face" with urban wildlife pest problems. Skunks have adapted well to the encroachment that people have placed upon their once secluded territories taking full advantage of human created habitats and readily available food sources.

In urban areas skunks may take up residence in: crawl spaces, under decks and porches, in culverts and sewers, deserted buildings and other voids within structures, they will often burrow into the ground next to foundations, concrete slabs, and asphalted areas.

Skunks in urban areas, camp sites, and metropolitan parks become opportunistic feeders. They will snatch up discarded food left on the ground, raid residential trash cans, and pilfer from commercial, restaurant and school site based dumpsters.

Skunks may also be transmitters of zoonotic diseases (a disease that is transmitted from domesticated and wild animals to humans). However, skunks very rarely inflict humans. Skunks may fall victim to and suffer from: canine distemper, canine hepatitis, leptospirosis, listeriosis, Q-fever, tularemia, trypanosoma. Although not all skunks have rabies, they are known carriers of rabies. Therefore, bites from skunks should be tested and/or treated by a physician as potentially rabid.

►Diseases from skunks may possibly be transferred to humans through three modes of transmission:

- ***directly*** (by handling the animal or receiving a bite)
- ***indirectly*** (via ticks, fleas, and mosquitoes)
- ***environmental contamination*** ((contact with contaminated materials (organic and non-organic) and contaminated equipment)).

►Sound Advice: Never approach or handle skunks as they are wild animals and may possibly be vectors of diseases, and may spray, scratch and/or bite you. If a bite or scratch has occurred to you or your pet, contact your local health agency.

Use School IPM Strategies for Skunks

Keep all bushes, plants, and trees trimmed back at least 18' away from the structure. This will allow easier inspection of exterior walls and the foundation.

Check exterior walls and foundation for gaps or voids and seal them with suitable materials.

Check the ground where it meets the structures foundation for evidence of digging and/or burrows.

If a skunk has taken up residence under a porch, deck, or the structure itself, you can seal up all points of entry except one. Then apply a coating of flour, talcum powder, or a layer of fine sand at the entrance. Examine the powder or sand after dark. If tracks are observed in the tracking material (tracks leading away from the structure only), then immediately seal up that last gap.

Keep in mind: mating season, gestation period, long periods of inactivity in the winter, and number of young to avoid sealing young skunks within the void!

Keep your surrounding grounds free of discarded or spilled food, empty food cartons, containers, and/or food wrappers.

Use lids and racks to secure outdoor trash cans. Assure that lids are tightly fitted and latched. Keep all trash and recyclable receptacle lids closed and/or locked at night.

Skunks are expert diggers. If you have continuing problems with burrows being created around the structures foundation you may wish to construct a rat wall around your existing slab. Concrete rat walls act as a barrier to the structures foundation that keep burrowing pests away. Plans can be located via the internet.

If you or your pet has been sprayed by a skunk, there are several commercially available deodorizing products and home remedy products you may choose from to eliminate the problem. However, always check with your family doctor or veterinarian (which ever the case may be) for product effectiveness and any potential allergies or side effects.

Trapping Notes for the Pest management Professional

- Suggested baits for trapping skunks may include: bacon, cat food, chicken parts and entrails, hard boiled eggs, fresh fish, black strap molasses and/or peanut butter on bread, and sardines.
- Cover traps with heavy burlap or tarps during placement. This will aid in the prevention of being sprayed while you are checking the traps. Assure that the covering does not interfere with the trapping (trigger) mechanisms or cover the trap entrance.
- Check traps daily and release all non-target animals. Always approach traps cautiously and quietly!
- Check all state and local laws for trapping laws and regulations and for animal release or euthanasia procedures.
- Above all, before you trap, assure that you have the proper credentials to trap legally. For example, here in Ohio, you must obtain a hunting license, a fur taking permit, and a nuisance trapping permit (in that order) to trap commercially for schools, facilities and residences other than your own property.

►For more information on skunks and trapping, check the Ohio Department of Natural Resources website: www.WildOhio.com or visit your own state natural resource departments website.

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Informational Resources:

►***Truman's Scientific Guide To Pest Management Operations*** *Sixth Edition; Bennett, Owens, Corrigan; A Purdue University/Advanstar Communications Project, 2003.*

►*Ohio Department of Agricultures* ***General Pest Control 10a*** *text book (2001). Editor: Carolyn Randall, Extension Associate/Pesticide Education Program/Michigan State University. General Pest Control 10a text book adapted from Urban Integrated Pest Management, A Guide for Commercial Applicators, written by: Dr. Eugene Wood, University of Maryland, and Lawrence Pinto. Pinto & Associates. Dual Associates, Arlington, Va, February 1991.*

►Interview with: Gary Comer, Asst. Wildlife Management Supervisor, Ohio Department of Natural Resources.

►Issue review and updated information provided by: Dr. Lynn Braband, NYS Community IPM Program of Cornell University.

►Striped Skunk Photography: Minnesota Department of Natural Resources.