

*BIOLOGY, LEGAL STATUS, CONTROL MATERIALS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR USE*

**Skunks**

*Mephitis mephitis* Striped skunk

*Spilogale gracilis* Western spotted skunk

Family: Mephitidae

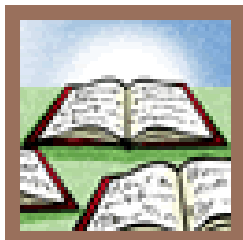


**Introduction:** Two species of skunk are found in California; the striped skunk and the rarer spotted skunk. Both are equipped with a powerful and protective scent gland that can spray a potent and pungent liquid up to 10 feet. The secretion is acrid enough to cause nausea and can produce severe burning and temporary blindness if it strikes the eyes. The spotted skunk is fewer in numbers throughout the state and less tolerant of human activity.



**Identification:** The striped skunk is about the size of an adult house cat, 2 to 3 feet long, including tail and weighing 10 to 15 pounds, with the familiar black fur and white coloring on the top of the head and neck. In most animals the white extends down the along the back, separating into two white stripes. Conversely, spotted skunks are black with white spots or short streaks of white. They are smaller than striped skunks by about 50%.

Because skunks are active at night, many people never see them as they travel through their neighborhoods or yards. Barking dogs may be the first apparent clue. If skunks travel through your yard or garden repeatedly, you should be able to detect a faint skunk odor, even if the skunk has not sprayed. The presence of skunk odor in late winter is a signal to keep an eye out for the presence of skunks. At this time appropriate measures may be necessary to deny pregnant females access to potential nesting sites underneath buildings.



**Legal Status:** The California Fish and Game Code classifies skunks as nongame mammals. The owner or tenant of premises may take at any time and in any legal manner nongame mammals injuring or threatening property. Fish and Game regulations prohibit the relocation of skunks and other wildlife without written

permission of the DFG. The prevalence of rabies in the skunk population is one of several major reasons for denying relocation.



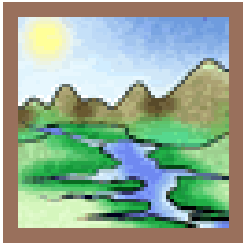
**Damage:** Primarily skunks are a nuisance, rather than causing damage. They are attracted to residential areas by the availability of food, water, and shelter. They become a nuisance when they live under open porches, decks, and garden sheds or if access is possible beneath homes. Ripening berries and fallen fruit are a skunk favorite. Many garden problems are caused by their digging activities while in search of grubs and other insects. In lawns they may dig small pits or cone shaped depressions from 3 to 5 inches in diameter in search of food. Also they may roll back sections of newly laid sod searching for insects. Obviously, their spray is quite objectionable.



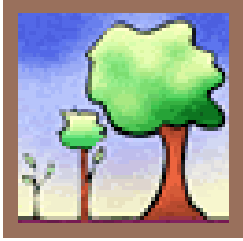
**Range:**

[Western Spotted Skunk](#)

[Striped Skunk](#)



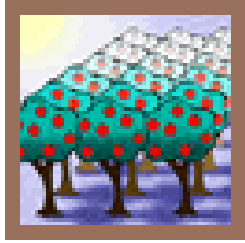
**Habitat:** Skunks are nocturnal, hunting for insects, grubs, and small rodents, snakes, frogs, mushrooms, berries and fruit, pet food, bird food, and garbage in urban and suburban areas. Skunks have a strong preference for eggs and are serious predators of ground nesting birds.



**Biology:** Skunks usually breed during February and March, with litters born about 9 weeks later. Litters range from 4 to 6 'kits.' Within a few months the young are seen following their mother as she makes nightly rounds searching for food. Skunks do not hibernate, but in those regions of colder weather females many assemble in communal dens during the winter.

Skunks often den in burrows but prefer to do as little digging as possible. They will use and enlarge an abandoned burrow dug by a ground squirrel, fox or coyote. If dens are scarce they will readily use brush piles, hollow logs and culverts. In urban areas they den under decks, porches or beneath buildings.

Skunks are a primary carrier of rabies in California. Thus their preference for urban and suburban settings is a cause for concern. Rabies is a viral disease transmitted by the bite of an infected animal. Skunks are also carriers of other diseases including leptospirosis, listeriosis, canine distemper, canine hepatitis, Q-fever, tularemia, and trypanosome. Recent research has focused on dispensing oral vaccine to skunks.



**Damage Prevention and Control Methods:** Because rabies is endemic in the skunk population, some city and county health departments assist in their control by providing trappers to remove them from residential areas. Control methods focus on making the garden yard and residence less attractive to skunks; trapping can be used if these methods are not sufficient.

**Exclusion:** As with many other vertebrate pests, the best solution to skunks problems is to screen or block them out. To do this, close all potential entrances and openings under houses, garden sheds, mobile homes, porches, and decks with 1/4inch mesh hardware cloth. This small mesh will also doubly serve to exclude rats and mice if installed correctly. Note that skunks will work hard to get into a desirable denning space, so make sure the screen fits tightly. If there is soil underneath the screen, bury the screen 6 inches deep to make a good seal.

When skunks inhabit a building or den space, exclusion is more difficult because first you must make sure the animals, and their young if present, have left before blocking the opening. To do this sprinkle a smooth layer of flour or construction caulk about 1/8 inch thick in front of the point of the entrance to form a 'tracking patch.' This will allow you to examine the patch, shortly after dark. The presence of footprints indicates that the animal has left and the opening can be closed.

Where you are unsure if the skunks have left or there are young, install a one way outward swinging gate made from 1/2 inch mesh hardware cloth. Hinge the gate at the top and leave loose on the other three sides. Make the gate larger than the opening so that it can only swing outward. If the young are still immobile an alternative is the placing of one or more floodlights beneath the building opposite the entry point. A well lit area is not conducive to denning and skunks usually leave.

**Habitat Modification:** Cut back overgrown shrubbery and tightly stack firewood to reduce potential den sites. Remove and dispose of fallen fruit. Garbage cans should have tightly sealed lids. Do not place food items or table scraps outdoors. Food placed outdoors for pets should be removed by nightfall.

**Frightening:** Not a recommended method.

**Fumigants:** Burrow fumigants, such as gas or smoke cartridges used on ground squirrels, may be used in rural areas providing the use is allowed on the product label. Ensure that the burrows used by skunks can be located and are not under or near buildings to avoid fire issues.

**Repellents:** Commercial products are available for repelling skunks. Unfortunately, they are not very effective. The odor of mothballs ordinary household ammonia has been used as a home remedy repellent some success in driving skunks from underneath buildings, although this not recommended. Some have suggested spraying your lawn with an appropriate insecticide to control grubs and other insects, thereby reducing the food supply for skunks and discouraging them from further digging. If your lawn is infested with insects and grubs contact your local University of California



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Cooperative Extension office for information on how to control these pests. <http://www.ipm.ucdavis.edu>

**Toxic Bait:** None registered.

**Trapping:** Because rabies is endemic in the skunk population, some city and county health departments assist in their control by providing trappers to remove them from residential areas.

Skunks cannot be relocated without a permit, and it is unlikely the Department of Fish and Game would issue one because of the risk of the potential for spreading rabies.

Skunks can be trapped with an enclosed cage-type live-catch trap. Plastic box traps are superior to wire traps because they are completely enclosed, reducing the risk of getting sprayed while removing the trapped animal from the site. It is recommended that individuals who have no experience in trapping skunks should hire a professional wildlife control operator. They have the experience and all the necessary equipment to trap and dispatch the animal.

**Other:** In rural areas where it is safe to do so, skunks may be spotlighted and shot. Since they may spray in the process, be selective in the location chosen for this method.

**Odor Removal:** There are several options for odor removal. The chemical neutrolem-alpha is one of the most useful neutralizers for removing the unpleasant skunk scent on furniture or in buildings, but this material and products containing it are not readily available. There are also other commercial products sold for neutralizing or masking skunk odor. If you cannot find such products easily, contact a professional wildlife control operator, who may be able to provide neutrolem-alpha or can tell you where it can be purchased. Do not use neutrolem-alpha on pets or people. If your dog or cat has confronted a skunk, call your veterinarian to determine current recommendations for washing the animal to get rid of skunk odor.

A home remedy formulation reported by some to be effective is as follows:

- 1 quart 3% hydrogen peroxide
- 1/4 cup baking soda
- 1 teaspoon liquid soap.

Once the hydrogen peroxide is mixed with the baking soda, the mixture is unstable and generates oxygen, and thus cannot be bottled or stored. Apparently, oxidation changes the chemical composition of skunk scent so that it no longer smells. When the fresh mixture is applied to items contaminated by skunk odor, the smell diminishes quickly. Any leftover mixture should be diluted several fold with water and poured down the drain. Hydrogen peroxide mixtures can be used safely on pets and people as well as on clothing and furniture. Rinse pets thoroughly with water after treatment.

**Skunk Bites:** Rabies, an infectious disease caused by a virus organism, is found in the saliva of infected animals. It affects only mammals and is transmitted most commonly by a bite. The disease is

almost always fatal if untreated. People can survive the bite of a rabid animal if medical attention is received in time. A physician should attend to ALL skunk bites, no matter how minor, and the local health department should be notified of the incident.

Skunks that seem tame or listless and wander about during daylight hours should be treated with great caution because this behavior is symptomatic of rabies. Also, if they exhibit no fear of people or pets and show some aggressive behavior, chances are quite high that they are rabid.

If you live in an area where skunks occur, be sure your dogs and cats are routinely vaccinated against rabies. Some dogs will confront skunks whenever they get an opportunity. Even though they suffer when they get sprayed, some dogs never learn.

## REFERENCES AND ADDITIONAL READING

Algeo T.P., Slate, D., Chandler, M.D., Chipman, R.B., Passive Tracking Stations as a Method for providing Rabies Reservoir Population Information for Oral Rabies Vaccination, Proc. 21st Vertebr Pest Conf. (R.M. Timm and W.P. Gorenzel, Eds.) Published at Univ. of Calif., Davis. 2004

Jojola, S.M., Robinson, S.J., VerCauteren, K.C., Oral Rabies Vaccine (ORV) Bait Uptake by Striped Skunks Preliminary Results, Proc. 21st Vertebr Pest Conf. (R.M. Timm and W.P. Gorenzel, Eds.) Published at Univ. of Calif., Davis. 2004

