

Striped Skunk

Mephitis mephitis

- Description:** Fur is black with white stripes. Stripes start in a triangle on the head and split into two stripes with run down the length of the back before merging back together at the base of the fluffy tail. There is another stripe from the forehead to down the nose. Each skunk has its own stripe pattern, males and females colored alike. Feet at partially webbed and there are long claws on the front feet to help with digging.
- Size:** Small mammal, the size of a cat with shorter legs. Can weigh 2-12 lbs.
- Habitat:** Found in woods and grasslands as well as urban areas. Take over the boroughs of foxes and other animals, but will build their own if necessary.
- Range:** Found throughout USA. In SC, they are common in the mountains, uncommon in piedmont and rare or absent in the coastal plain.
- Predators:** Bobcats, hawks, great horned owls and humans (hunting/cars).
- Diet/Prey:** Mainly insects, but also small mammals, birds, eggs, fruits, berries, carrion, worms and even fish.
- Aquarium Diet:** Vegetables, such as broccoli, sweet potato, squash and carrots, as well as spinach, lettuce and mixed greens. This is supplemented with a small amount of Mazuri omnivore pellets.
- Reproduction:** Males and females reach sexual maturity around 10 months old. Mating begins in February and March. Females are monoestrous but can come into season again if the first litter does not survive. Males are polygamous. They do not stay with the female and do not raise the young. The gestation period is around 59 - 77 days, at which point 2 to 10 babies are born. They are weaned at 6 weeks and ultimately leave their mother after one year.
- Fun Facts:**
- The Algonquian Indian name "seganku," meaning "one who squirts," became the English word "skunk."
 - The genus and species name, "Mephitis" means "bad odor." Mephitis was the Roman goddess of poisonous vapors that came from swamps.
 - Skunks only live 2-3 years in the wild, but can live up to 10 years in captivity.
 - In winter, they fatten up and hang out in their dens, but do not hibernate.
 - Skunks have a great sense of hearing, but a bad sense of sight.
 - Skunks only have one set of molars on their upper jaw and two sets on their lower jaw.
 - Defense mechanisms include posturing, stomping feet, growling, and finally, spraying (about 1 tablespoon worth of musk).
 - Musk is used as a base for perfume (after scent is removed!)
 - Fur used to be desired (striped skunk has highest quality of fur among all skunks), but nowadays it costs more to raise the skunk than their fur is worth, so it has fallen out of favor.
 - Skunks are a rabies vector animal.
 - A skunk's spray can reach up to 12 feet and can control the direction of their spray.

- They used to belong to the family “Mustelidae,” which is the family otters belong to. Due to DNA testing, they were found to be distantly related and are now exclusively in the family “Mephitidae.”
- Nearly all skunks live in the Americas, except for the Asian stink badgers that have recently been added to the skunk family.
- Skunks are nocturnal or crepuscular (hunt and dawn and dusk)

Ecology: Because of their insect-heavy diet, skunks are more of a help than a nuisance to farmers – even though they do eat bees and poultry from time to time. Overall, they help control rodent and insect populations. In New York State, skunks are protected because they eat the hop grub and help out farmers!

Conservation Connection: Skunks are very confident animals, due to their solid defense mechanisms. They are also very slow-moving. These two traits together cause dead skunks to be a common sight on the side of roads. They will not move out of the way for a car, and many people – expecting the skunk to move – accidentally run them over.

Status in SC: Species of least concern. No special status.

Aliases: Also known as a polecat (which is actually a type of European weasel!)

References: Wm. David Webster, James F. Parnell & Walter C. Biggs, Jr.
Mammals of the Carolinas, Virginia & Maryland. University of North Carolina Press. 1985.

Animal Diversity Web

<http://animaldiversity.ummz.umich.edu/site/accounts/classification/Mephitis.html#Mephitis>

Hinterland's Who's Who

<http://hww.ca/hww2.asp?id=104>

The Mammals of Texas – Online Edition

<http://www.nsrl.ttu.edu/tmot1/mephmeph.htm>

eNature Guides

http://www.enature.com/flashcard/show_flash_card.asp?recordNumber=MA0034

Wikipedia

http://www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Striped_Skunk