

Striped Skunk



Striped Skunk, ©Herb Lange, DNR use only.

The skunk is a member of the weasel family. Some people call them "stink cats," "polecats" or "smell cats." (I bet you can guess why.) With a name like that, you'll definitely want to keep your distance. Skunks have a fierce and stinky defense system under their large bushy tails. They can spray foul-smelling musk at predators as far as 15 feet away.

The smell can carry for a mile! And, as if the overpowering smell isn't bad enough, the musk can also burn eyes and cause a temporary loss of vision. Not much fun for an unsuspecting predator.

This mammal is the size of large house cat. Striped skunks have black fur with a wide, white stripe from the head all the way down the back on the body. Their tail is bushy and long, with long white and black fur. A white triangle can be seen on their face starting at the forehead and pointing down like an arrowhead to their nose. They are nocturnal animals (active mostly after dark). They don't hibernate, but stay in their dens during most of the winter.

Skunks live in farmland, woodland edges, brushy areas along stream banks and ditches. They like to create dens in late fall in warm, cozy places like caves, rock openings, or a hollow stump or fallen log. They may also choose a house porch, wood pile, or a stack of building materials - so watch out! A litter of young are born in the den sometime from May until mid-June with six or seven "kits" or "cubs" per litter.



Skunk Track

These "smelly cats" eat bees, crickets, grasshoppers, beetles, cutworms, armyworms, and other insect larvae. A characteristic sign that a skunk is around are diggings, 1 or 2 inches deep and 3-4 inches across made by the claws and nose of the animal. Skunks also eat small mammals like mice, rats, shrews, moles and ground squirrels. They'll also eat broken bird eggs, and sometimes turtle eggs that they dig up from a nest.

Plants, especially fruit in the summer are also favorites. Don't be surprised if they nibble at your garden vegetables and fruits.

Only the great horned owl is unruffled by the skunk's chemical warfare. The great horned owl and barred owl are its only predators in the wild. A young coyote might try to take a skunk, but quickly learns the hard way to leave this critter alone. Skunks are frequently killed on roadways by cars.

Skunks can, occasionally, cause problems for people and curious pets. Their "odorous musk" or stinky smell can be hard to get out of a dog's fur. They also like to dig in lawns for insects, leaving behind holes. Skunks can get rabies easily and transmit it to other animals.

The striped skunk is very common in Wisconsin. They're not very aggressive and typically plod along minding their own business. But, if you see one, it's best to quietly move away so you don't become a victim of this "stinky cat."

(Note: The striped skunk has a close relative, the spotted skunk. It is rare in Wisconsin and there have only been a few sightings of it over the last several years.)