



# Living With Wildlife

## The Skunk in Massachusetts

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The striped skunk, *Mephitis mephitis*, is a common mammal found throughout the United States and southern Canada, except for some desert areas of the Southwest. Striped skunks are found throughout most of Massachusetts, except for the Elizabeth Islands and Nantucket. They are highly adaptable and use a variety of habitats including fields, open woodlands, wetlands, beaches, salt marshes, and agricultural areas, as well as urban and suburban developments. In Massachusetts,

their predators include Great-horned owls, coyotes, foxes and domestic dogs.

**Description:** Striped skunks are similar in size to domestic cats, weighing 6 to 10 pounds. They have pointed snouts and small, triangular heads with a white stripe on the nose and forehead. Typically the coat is black, with white stripes that extend down their nape and split into two white stripes on the back. These white stripes are as unique as human fingerprints; they vary for each individual. The tails of skunks are wide, long and bushy, and can be all black or have varying amounts of white. Due to their short legs, they appear to waddle when they walk and are generally poor climbers. However, they have strong forefeet and long nails, which make them excellent diggers.

**Life History:** Breeding season typically occurs from February through March. In late April and early May, the female will excavate a den and give birth to 2-10 kits, which are born blind and helpless. If disturbed, females will move their kits to a new den. The kits do not leave the den until they are approximately 6 to 8 weeks old. When they leave the den, the kits follow their mother in search of food and will den with her in alternate dens until they are independent at two to five months.

During the summer months, skunks typically sleep in retreats above ground; shaded areas in tall grass, under shrubs, in thickets, or under decks and buildings. They do not show much fidelity to above ground retreats, but will re-visit them from time to time.

Skunks are not true hibernators. When nighttime temperatures are above 30° F, skunks become active for periods of time. Thus, dog owners should beware on unusually warm winter nights. Skunks will be out and about, stretching their legs and searching for food. When temperatures stay below freezing however, skunks will sleep to conserve energy.

**Habits:** Striped skunks are typically docile mammals that tolerate humans in close proximity without showing aggression. The most distinguishing characteristic of all skunks is their ability to direct a stream or spray of musk for several meters from paired anal glands. The musk is a strong irritant to the eyes and nose, and acts as a depressant to the central nervous system. If threatened, skunks will give many warning signs before spraying their potential victim. If the potential threat does not leave, the skunk will begin to turn its hind-end towards the threat and begin to expose its anal glands and the bare skin surrounding them. This is the last warning a skunk gives before accurately directing a stream or fine mist of its musk at the perceived threat.

**Food:** Striped skunks are omnivores and primarily eat insects, invertebrates and fruit. Striped skunks will also eat human garbage, compost, and birdseed from feeders. Thus, they are can also be found around homes in urban and suburban areas. Their primary method of foraging involves digging, often appears as a single, small hole in a lawn, leaf litter, or sand.

## Help Keep Skunks Wild

Skunks, like several other wild animals, can thrive in suburban and urban areas. To avoid problems with skunks and to make your property less attractive to them, you should follow some basic rules.

1. **Remain calm when encountering a skunk!** Should you encounter a skunk, speak softly and move away in order to give it room to leave. Once you back away, the skunk will no longer feel threatened and will move off. If it doesn't, try clapping your hands and making some noise from a safe distance.

2. **Secure your garbage!** Skunks will raid open trash materials and compost piles. Secure your garbage in tough plastic containers with tight fitting lids and keep in secure buildings when possible. Take out trash the morning pick up is scheduled, not the previous night. Keep compost piles in containers designed to contain but vent the material.

3. **Feed pets indoors!** Outdoor feeding attracts skunks and other types of wild animals to your door!

4. **Close off crawl spaces under porches and sheds!** Skunks will use such areas for resting and raising young. Close shed and garage doors at night, and use chicken wire to keep skunks from digging under porches.

5. **Protect your pet from being sprayed!** Always turn on a flood light and check your yard for skunks before letting your dog out at night

6. **Keep bird feeder areas clean!** Use feeders designed to keep seed off the ground as the seeds can attracts skunks. Remove feeders if skunks are seen regularly around your yard.

7. **Educate your neighbors!** Pass this information along since your efforts could be futile if neighbors are purposely or unintentionally providing food or shelter for skunks.

Skunks are an important natural resource in Massachusetts. They are classified as a furbearer species, for which established regulated hunting exists. If you are experiencing problems with, or have questions regarding skunks, contact your nearest MassWildlife District office. Further information on skunks and other native furbearing species is also available at [www.mass.gov/masswildlife](http://www.mass.gov/masswildlife).

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For more information contact **MassWildlife** at:

**Western Wildlife District, Dalton:** (413) 684-1646

**Connecticut Valley Wildlife Dist., Belchertown:** (413) 323-7632

**Central Wildlife District, West Boylston:** (508) 835-3607

**Northeast Wildlife District, Ayer:** (978) 772-2145

**Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne:** (508) 759-3406

**Field Headquarters, Westborough:** (508) 389-6300

or visit our website at [www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/facilities/districts](http://www.mass.gov/dfwele/dfw/facilities/districts)

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