



LIVING WITH WILDLIFE

STRIPED SKUNKS

IN MASSACHUSETTS



The striped skunk is a common mammal found throughout most of Massachusetts, except for the Elizabeth Islands and Nantucket. They are highly adaptable and use a variety of habitats including meadows, farmlands, woods, wetlands, beaches, 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 14 pounds. They have pointed snouts and small, triangular heads with a white stripe on the nose and forehead. Typically their 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, varying 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. They have strong forefeet and long nails, however, which make them excellent diggers.

LIFE HISTORY

Breeding season typically occurs from February through March. In late April to early June, 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. The average lifespan of a skunk in the wild is about 2–3 years, but they can live up to 15 years in captivity.

During the summer months, skunks typically sleep in retreats above ground; shaded areas in tall grass, under shrubs, in thickets, or under decks and building. 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.

FOOD, HABITS, AND HABITAT

Striped skunks are typically docile mammals that tolerate humans in close proximity without showing aggression. The most distinguishing characteristic is a skunk's ability to direct a stream or spray of musk as far as 10 feet 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.

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

TIPS FOR RESIDENTS

Skunks, like many other wild animals, can thrive in suburban and urban areas. If you want to make your property less attractive to skunks and avoid having any problems, follow these basic practices. Remember, share these tips with your neighbors; your efforts will be futile if neighbors provide food or shelter for skunks.

REMAIN CALM: 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.

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 them 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.

KEEP BIRD FEEDER AREAS CLEAN: Use feeders designed to keep seed off the ground as the seeds can attract skunks. Remove bird feeders if skunks are seen regularly around your yard.

PET OWNERS: To help prevent your pet from being sprayed, turn on a flood light and check your yard for skunks before letting your dog out at night. Additionally, feed pets indoors. Outdoor feeding attracts skunks and other wild animals.



Skunks are an important and valuable natural resource in Massachusetts. They are classified as a furbearer species, for which a regulated trapping season and management program have been established.

IF YOU ARE EXPERIENCING PROBLEMS WITH SKUNKS OR HAVE QUESTIONS, VISIT MASS.GOV/MASSWILDLIFE OR CONTACT YOUR NEAREST MASSWILDLIFE OFFICE:

Central Wildlife District, West Boylston: (508) 835-3607
Connecticut Valley Wildlife District, Belchertown: (413) 323-7632
Northeast Wildlife District, Ayer: (978) 772-2145
Southeast Wildlife District, Bourne: (508) 759-3406
Western Wildlife District, Dalton: (413) 684-1646
Field Headquarters, Westborough: (508) 389-6300

Photos courtesy of MassWildlife/Bill Byrne