



## **Striped Skunks: Aromatic engineers**

*By Samuel T. Smallidge, Extension Wildlife Specialist*

The most common skunk in New Mexico is the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*). Their jet-black fur is marked by prominent, longitudinal white stripes that run from the neck along the length of the back, often splitting into a V-shape towards the rear. There tends to be a prominent white stripe on their snout and forehead. Tails are of black pelage and may have white hairs along the edges. Striped skunks are stout looking animals with small ears and short legs with well-developed claws for digging. Striped skunks are known to live in close association with humans. The home ranges of skunks are typically 0.5 to 2.0 miles in diameter and vary depending on location and habitat quality.



### **Striped skunk**

(Courtesy of Alfred Viola, Northeastern University, Bugwood.org)

## Skunk Aromatics

Striped skunk's conspicuous coloration serve as a warning to would-be predators to avoid them or suffer the consequences of being sprayed with a concentrated musk. They tend to be docile and may not acknowledge human presence until they feel threatened. It is possible to approach a skunk closely before they react. All skunks have the ability to discharge a powerful and nauseating yellow musk from a pair of enlarged anal glands multiple times. Skunk musk contains a sulfur-based organic molecule called a thiol. These organic molecules are responsible for the intense scent of skunk musk. Thiols are also found in onions, garlic, rotting flesh and natural gas (added) petroleum, bad breath and flatus. Skunk musk may cause severe burning and tearing upon entering the eyes making it difficult to see for several minutes. Breathing, especially through the nose, may be difficult as well. These reactions make pursuit of the skunk nearly impossible, allowing the skunk to escape potential predators unharmed.

Behaviors of skunks prior to spraying a potential threat vary and may include various combinations of the following actions. Skunks may run away and hide if time allows, run several feet and turn back toward the threat or they may just turn without running and face the threat. They may stomp their forefeet, raise up on their hind feet and drop-stomp their forefeet while hissing loud. They may charge toward the threat and click their teeth. They often raise their tails up or may lay their raised tail along their back. They may do a handstand and bend their hindquarters over their head to point at the threat. Further behaviors include, scratching at the ground and throwing debris, hissing, and baring their teeth. Skunks may spray a mist while running away or produce a highly accurate stream aimed at the threat. While facing the perceived threat they turn their hindquarters toward the threat prior to spraying or do a handstand and arch their hindquarters over their heads before spraying. If faced with a skunk showing signs of spraying, retreat slowly and quietly while avoiding sudden movements and loud noises.

## **Aromatic Mitigation**

Skunk musk is persistent and may be nauseating to some people. Light colored absorbent and hard surfaces may exhibit yellow stains post exposure. Cleaning hard surfaces with a mild bleach solution helps break down the potent thiols. Other household cleaners may also be useful in cleaning hard surfaces that have been sprayed. Musk sprayed on hard surfaces such as walls or siding may remain pungent for several days' post-exposure, but will dissipate. If a skunk has sprayed under a structure, place fans in front of openings or vents to create a cross draft to aid in ventilating the area.

For absorbent surfaces such as clothing, human skin and animal fur, musk soaks in contributing to its persistence. If recreating outdoors, smoke sprayed clothing over cedar, juniper or other aromatic-wood fires. Commercial odor removers to remove most of the scent from absorbent surfaces are readily available. Commercial scent removers are available at pet stores, feed stores or online. Be sure to read the label carefully prior to applying it to your person, clothes or a pet – to reduce the chance of harm or unintended consequences. Even after cleaning, absorbent materials may smell better when dry only to express the musk scent again when wetted.

A proven home remedy developed by Paul Krebaum, first described in 1993 in the American Chemists Society's Chemical & Engineering News, removes skunk scent by oxidizing the pungent molecules in skunk musk.

### **The Skunk Remedy Recipe:**

In a plastic bucket, mix well the following ingredients:

1 quart of 3% hydrogen peroxide

1/4 cup of baking soda

1 to 2 teaspoons liquid soap

For large pets, one quart of tepid tap water may be added to enable complete coverage.

Repeated applications may improve outcomes.

Carefully follow the detailed instructions on

<http://home.earthlink.net/~skunkremedy/home/sk00001.htm>

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Thanksgiving Holiday**



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