



Managing Skunk Problems in Kentucky



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Because skunks are found almost everywhere throughout Kentucky—in agricultural areas, woodlots, towns and cities—we are all familiar with the unmistakable odor they discharge when provoked. This obnoxious odor causes humans to fear and dislike skunks.

Despite our dislike for them, skunks are, for the most part, beneficial to us because they feed on insect and rodent pests. Occasionally, skunks can cause problems or become a nuisance when their digging activities or feeding habits conflict with humans, or they release their odorous musk in self-defense.

This publication provides information on:

- the identification, biology, and natural history of skunks,
- preventing unwanted encounters with these smelly carnivores, and
- controlling individual skunk problems when they occur.

These animals are much more nervous than striped skunks and are better climbers.

Because many of the habits of the two species are similar, skunk biology and natural history will be combined in this publication.

Identification

Two species of skunks live in Kentucky. The striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) can be found in every county. The spotted skunk (*Spilogale putorius*) is rare and can be found only in the southeastern corner of the state.

Skunks are often referred to as polecats, civet cats, hydrophobia cats, or big striped skunks. The spotted skunk is incorrectly called a civet cat because of its similarity to Old World civets. Skunks are not closely related to either true civets or to cats.

Skunks are members of the weasel family (*Mustelidae*). All members of this family (skunks, river otters, long-tailed weasels, least weasels, and mink) have characteristic musk glands.

Striped skunks are short, stocky mammals about the size of a domestic house cat. They typically have a triangular-shaped head tapering to a blunt nose, a large bushy tail, and large feet equipped with well-developed claws.

Their color pattern is typically characterized by two prominent white stripes down the back in a coat of jet black fur. The amount of white on the back varies tremendously, from just a patch on the head to stripes covering the entire back.

Spotted skunks are about one-half the size of striped skunks and are much more weasel-like. They are readily distinguishable by white spots in front of each ear and on the forehead and four to six broken white stripes on the back.

Skunk Facts and Biology

Skunks can be found in a variety of habitats throughout Kentucky. Favored haunts include rolling hayfields, fencerows, brushland, woodland edges, weedy fields, rocky outcrops, wooded ravines, stone walls, and drainage ditches. Home to a skunk is an underground den that may be found in vacant buildings; under house porches, culverts, brush piles, tree stumps, lumber piles; or in abandoned fox or woodchuck burrows.

The dens are lined with leaves, hay, or grasses. Skunks use a variety of dens for loafing during the day, for giving birth and raising young, and for periods of inactivity during the winter. During the day, skunks usually sleep in the den, although during the warmer months, they may bed in vegetation along fencerows, hayfields, or pastures.

During the winter months, skunks may remain inactive in the den for a period of days or weeks. Skunks do not hibernate but become inactive during cold weather, relying on stored body fat to get them through the winter. Several skunks may share the same den during winter to conserve body heat.

Skunks are nocturnal, becoming active from sunset to slightly after sunrise. Female skunks are not great travelers, whereas male skunks may travel up to four or five miles a night during breeding season. Skunk home ranges normally vary from one to one and a half miles in diameter.

During the breeding season, males move slowly, become active during the day, and are reluctant to flee when endangered. This is the time when skunks are often struck by cars.

The breeding season for skunks in Kentucky begins in late January when males begin searching for females near winter dens. Skunks mate in February, and the blind, wrinkled, thinly furred young are born in May and June. Usually five to nine young kits are born in a litter, but there can be as many as 18 or as few as two.

Young skunks are weaned when they are about two months old. Families break up during August and September when the young leave to find their own homes.

Skunks are opportunistic feeders, feeding on both plant and animal material. Favorite skunk foods are grasshoppers, crickets, beetles, wasps, cutworms, and other insect larvae.

When insects are not available, skunks will eat mice, rats, shrews, moles, chipmunks, and other small mammals. Skunks will also eat reptiles, amphibians, fish, fruits, and garbage. They will occasionally feed on poultry and the eggs of ground-nesting birds.

Most of a skunk's diet consists of small mammals and insects considered injurious to man. Thus, when skunks are not causing a problem, many people believe they should be left alone because, on the whole, they do more good than harm.

Damage Assessment

Skunks become a problem when they dig under foundations; take up residence under a house, porch, or building; dig in lawns, golf courses, and gardens for insect larvae or roots; disturb refuse and garbage cans; or kill and eat poultry eggs or fowl. Skunk diggings normally appear as 3- to 4-inch cone-shaped holes or patches of upturned earth. Be cautious, as many other animals, including domestic dogs, also dig in lawns. Skunks can also damage beehives as they feed on adult and larval bees.

Most skunk problems are related to the animal's ability to discharge a very obnoxious odor when provoked. The scent, produced by two internal glands located at the base of the tail, is usually released for self-defense. Before spraying the thick, volatile, oily, sulfur-containing compound, skunks usually stamp their front feet rapidly and growl or hiss.

Skunks generally walk a short distance on their front feet and raise their tail as a warning before releasing any scent. The fluid is released in a fine spray directed accurately up to 10 feet and less accurately for 20 feet. Skunks can discharge the spray several times within a short period. The fluid is painful if it gets in a person's eyes and may cause temporary blindness for up to 15 minutes.

Rabies

Skunks are very susceptible to rabies. Because they can become locally abundant and transmit rabies to other mammals, skunks cause concern for human health and livestock safety. Rabies is a serious viral disease that infects many

types of warm-blooded animals. It is generally spread by direct contact with an infected individual, usually by biting.

When a skunk becomes infected with the rabies virus, it may go unnoticed for a period of time. Symptoms may not appear for weeks or months. During this time, the infected animal may transmit the virus to other animals it contacts. In the final stages of the disease, skunks may seem tame or listless, show signs of excessive salivation, become unusually aggressive or nervous, wander about during the daytime, and show little fear of humans.

Skunks are usually docile, slow-moving animals, and their main period of activity is from sunset to sunrise. If you notice a skunk acting strangely (aggressive or nervous, wandering in the daytime, or tame and listless), do not approach it. Parents should warn children never to approach or pet a skunk or any other wild animal. If you live in an area where there is a large skunk population, all pet dogs and cats and important livestock should be vaccinated for rabies.

Do not keep skunks or other wild animals as pets because they cannot be effectively immunized against the disease. Furthermore, they may have contracted rabies at an early age and be infected, yet fail to exhibit symptoms for some time.

If you are bitten by a skunk or other wild animal, capture and cage the animal if at all possible. Do not shoot the skunk in the head because the health department will require the head to determine if the animal was rabid. After you have been bitten, scrub the wound with warm soapy water for at least 20 minutes. Immediately after cleansing the wound, seek medical attention.

Submit the head of the animal to the state public health department for testing. Your local public health authorities, physician, or veterinarian can provide additional information on rabies. Animals suspected of being rabid should be submitted for diagnosis to your public health officials.

Skunk Odor Control

People often find the smell of skunk musk nauseating. Skunk odor can be effectively reduced by using a variety of commercial and home remedies. Neutrolem alpha is a commercial deodorant that effectively masks skunk musk. You can purchase it from USDA-APHIS-Animal Damage Control, 3231 Ruckriegel Parkway, Louisville, KY 40299.

When used properly, this compound can be used to bathe pets or humans or scrub basements, garages, floors, walls, etc. It can also be sprayed in a room or onto contaminated soil from an aerosol sprayer. Other commercial-strength deodorants available from janitorial supply houses may also be effective. Commercial odor deodorants or neutralizers such as Skunk Off, Skunk Stuff, Nil' Odor, and Ecosorb are available from trapping supply houses or mail-order companies.

Home remedies that may help to reduce the intensity of the smell include tomato juice, vinegar, and diluted chlorine bleach or ammonia. Be careful when using any of these materials because they may cause color changes on certain materials, and they may be caustic to humans and pets. Note cautions on product labels before using them.

Prevention and Control of Skunk Problems

Prevention

The best long-term solution to managing skunk problems is to prevent them from happening. Lawns and farmyards that are kept clean are less attractive to skunks. Remove all sources of debris from the yard where skunks could find shelter or food (insects or small rodents). These include old boards lying on the ground, rocks, junk, and stacked lumber or trash piles.

You can also reduce the opportunity for an encounter with one of these smelly creatures by placing garbage or other food materials in sealed trash cans (not garbage bags). If you feed pets outside, clean up all dog and cat food after each feeding, and store the feed in a steel trash can so it is unavailable to insect or rodent pests.

Many farmsteads have grain storage areas that attract mice and rats and possibly skunks in search of an easy meal. Unless the rodent problem is solved, this source of food will create a continual skunk problem. A good integrated rodent control program will eliminate this attraction. To summarize, modify the environment by removing sources of shelter and situations that create rodent or insect problems.

Most skunks can be prevented from digging and denning under foundations, porches, or buildings by sealing off all openings. With sturdy mesh wire (1/4- or 1/2-inch hardware cloth or similar material), tightly seal holes in foundations, under porches, or vents near ground level or other areas where a skunk could enter. If the skunk could gain access by digging, the mesh wire should be buried 12 to 18 inches underground. The bottom 6 inches should be bent outward in an "L" shape to discourage skunks from digging under it.

Aboveground fences can be constructed of 3-foot wide, 1-inch poultry netting with the bottom 12 inches buried underground as mentioned previously. Fencing will also keep skunks out of landscaped areas, gardens, window wells, or other pits.

If you know skunks are living under a house, porch, barn, or other structure, you can exclude them from reentering. Wait until after dark when the skunk has left to seek food. Examine the dirt at the den entrance. Fresh tracks indicate the skunk has left for the evening. If you do not see tracks easily, sprinkle fine sand, dust, or flour at the entrance as a visual aid.

If you think more than one skunk is living under the building, attach a piece of 1/2-inch hardware cloth to the opening. This wire should be larger than the entire entrance, be hinged at the top, and remain loose on the other three sides. This simple device will allow skunks to push open the gate and leave, but not reenter. Once the skunks are gone, seal the entrance and any other entrances completely. Be sure to follow the instructions on exclusion mentioned previously.



Control

There are no chemical repellents or toxicants (poisons) registered for controlling skunks in Kentucky. Other than habitat modification and exclusion mentioned above, the only methods available for controlling skunks are trapping and shooting.

Skunks are considered fur-bearing animals and receive protection under Kentucky law. However, if a skunk is damaging your property, you can legally kill or destroy the animal. You must then notify your local conservation officer to dispose of the carcass.

Shooting

If you live in a rural area, you can shoot skunks with a .22 caliber rifle or shotgun. You must be in a position so that when the skunk's odor is released, it will travel downwind from the house or other buildings. To lessen the chance of odor release, shoot the skunk just in front of the hind legs, followed immediately by another shot through the brain. If the head is to be examined for rabies, do not shoot the animal through the head. You must have a valid Kentucky hunting license to shoot skunks. In all other cases, shooting is not recommended because it often results in the release of odor.

Trapping

The preferred and most recommended solution to removing and disposing of problem skunks is trapping. Skunks can easily be trapped. A variety of live traps for catching skunks is available from hardware, agricultural supply and feed stores, or sporting goods stores (Figure 1). Select a size approximately 10 x 10 x 30 inches. Before setting the trap, cover it with heavy canvas to reduce the chances of a skunk releasing its scent (Figure 2). Be sure to leave each end open.

Bait the trap with canned or fresh fish, fish-flavored cat food, sardines, chicken entrails, or peanut butter. If you know the location of den's entrance, place the trap directly in front of it so the skunk will enter the trap as it leaves the den.

Skunks are easy to catch and can be transported without releasing their scent if done carefully. If you did not cover the trap with canvas, tarp, or thick burlap when it was set, slowly approach the animal, and gently cover the trap with the material. This creates a dark, secure environment, and the skunk will be less fearful and less likely to release its scent. Carefully pick up the covered trap, and gently place it in the back of a pickup truck for transportation. You must work quietly and slowly and avoid sudden jarring movements or loud noises.

Because of the potential for spreading rabies, skunks should not be released back into the environment but should be humanely disposed of.

If the skunk will be destroyed after it has been captured, steel leg-hold and killer-type traps can be used. If you use either of these types of traps, the likelihood a skunk will release its scent is greatly increased. **Never use these traps where pets could be captured.** Use a number 1 or 11/2 steel leg-hold trap or a 120 or 150 instant-killer-type trap.

Contact your local Kentucky Fish and Wildlife Resources biologist, Cooperative Extension Office, or USDA-APHIS-Animal Damage Control Officer for more information on using these types of traps.

Remember, skunks are an important part of the natural world. They are highly beneficial to farmers, gardeners, and landowners because they eat agricultural and garden pests that can cause health problems. The best approach in managing skunk problems, where possible, is to leave these animals alone.



Figure 1. Skunk in a live trap.



Figure 2. Skunk trap covered with canvas.

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