

Controlling Nuisance: Skunks

University of Missouri Extension Missouri

Department of Conservation

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Striped skunks occur throughout Missouri, although they are most common in agricultural and forest edge habitats. Their fur is shiny black with varying amounts of white on the head, back and tail. Adults are about two feet long, including the tail. Spotted skunks occur primarily in southern Missouri, but nowhere are they abundant. They are about one-half the size of striped skunks.

A characteristic strong, pungent odor results when skunks spray musk from their scent glands. These shy, secretive animals discharge their scent only when disturbed or harassed.

Skunks are nocturnal, and while they do not hibernate, they may be inactive for extended periods during winter. They feed on fruits, berries and insects, often digging cone-shaped holes in lawns to remove grubs. Insect-infested turf may be overturned in large patches. Small mammals, ground-nesting birds and eggs are eaten on occasion.

Skunks live in underground dens, usually renovated woodchuck burrows, or in rocky crevasses. In rural and suburban areas skunks may take refuge beneath buildings and in the crawl space under porches.

In late winter, skunks seek mates and breed. After about 2 months gestation, the young are born in the dens, and by summer they join the mother in foraging for food.

Control

Skunks are furbearers, and this classification provides them with legal protection except during the hunting and trapping season. Skunk activity rarely causes serious economic loss; rather, their scent creates a nuisance around occupied buildings. They should not be destroyed needlessly, since killing a skunk will add to the odor problems near people. When skunks dig holes or destroy turf in their search for grubs, the damage they do may be offset by the benefits of the grubs they control. Soil insects can be controlled with pesticides. Consult your local University Extension center for proper pesticides.

Mechanical. All ground-level openings in building foundations and openings beneath porches and crawl spaces should be sealed with concrete, sheet metal, or heavy wire to prevent skunks and other animals from becoming established in areas where they are not wanted. If skunks are already settled under a building, close all openings except one, then check the remaining opening for tracks after dark. It may be necessary to place an artificial tracking surface such as lime, sand or flour at the burrow entrance to determine if the skunk is inside or outside the den. If tracks show that the animal has left, close the opening. During May and June, young skunks may be left in the den unattended; avoid sealing the openings at that time because the young would starve.

Skunks occasionally bother beehives. When this occurs, put hives on stands several feet off the ground and tack sheet metal on the legs of stands to prevent skunks from climbing to the hives.

Skunks that invade suburban areas may accidentally fall into cellar window wells. Place a rough-sawn board, or one with cleats tacked crosswise, into the window well at a shallow angle so the skunk can climb out. If a skunk accidentally enters a garage or basement, do not chase or disturb it; leave doors open so the animal can wander out on its own after dark.

Trapping. Live-trapping with a wooden live trap baited with fish-based catfood, canned fish or chicken parts is the preferred method for removing nuisance skunks. Skunks should not be trapped in leg-hold traps as they will most likely release their scent. Wire live traps may be used, but a skunk is more likely to release its scent in this type of trap than in the more confining wooden live trap. Specifically designed fully metal traps are also commercially available.

Because the skunk is classified as a furbearer, you must contact your local conservation agent after capturing or killing a skunk so as not to be in conflict with the Wildlife Code. Skunks captured in a live trap can be moved safely if the trap is kept dark by covering it with an old rug or burlap and then is handled gently.

Odor. Skunk odor persists for long periods, and it is difficult to neutralize. Household products that help remove skunk odor include ammonia, bleach, vinegar and canned tomatoes or juice. Commercial deodorants, which are most effective in treating skunk odors, are available from some pest-control operators.

Missouri Wildlife Code Rule — 3CSR10-4.130

Owner May Protect Property. Subject to federal regulations governing the protection of property from migratory birds, any wildlife except deer which beyond reasonable doubt is damaging property may be captured or killed by the owner of the property being damaged, or by his agent, at any time and without permit, but only by shooting or trapping except by written authorization of the director. Wildlife may be so controlled only on the owner's property to prevent further damage. Wildlife so captured or killed may not be used, transported, sold or given away but must be reported to an agent of the commission within twenty-four (24) hours and disposed of in accordance with his instructions. Deer that are causing damage may be killed only with the permission of an agent of the commission and by methods authorized by him.

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