United States Department of Agriculture
Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service
Wildlife Services
3419A Arden Way
Sacramento, CA 95825

MANAGING SKUNK PROBLEMS

Many people consider skunks odorous, obnoxious pests that should be avoided at all costs. However, these animals have some beneficial habits, they kill insects and rodents. The striped skunk (Mephitis mephitis) is the most common species in California, although the smaller spotted skunk (Spilogale putorius) can be a local problem around dwellings. The striped skunk is a house-cat sized animal (4 - 10 lbs.) that has long black fur with two variable broad white stripes down the back. The head is triangular; the tail large and bushy. The strong musk characteristic of skunks is expelled from two scent glands near the anus.

BIOLOGY

Skunks are nocturnal, preferring to hunt at night for insects, small rodents, carrion, poultry, eggs, nestling birds, fruit, pet food, and garbage. Because they are active at night, many people never see the animals as they travel through their neighborhood, even in areas with a large skunk population. Skunks will use any sheltered place as a den including wood piles, animal burrows, culverts, under houses, decks, and sheds. Breeding may begin as early as January, but usually occurs during February and March. Males are viciously competitive for females, and bred females will attack males attempting to breed with them. One or both animals frequently spray during this intraspecific aggression. Litters are born 9 weeks after conception with an average of 4 - 8 young. The young skunks stay with the female for several months, but usually begin to disperse by mid to late summer.

DAMAGE

Skunks become a problem when their activities conflict with human interests. When skunks take shelter under homes, decks, or in garages, their presence is not usually tolerated by occupants of the building. All skunks have the ability to discharge a nauseating musk from their anal glands. They are capable of spraying their musk several times with accuracy to about 10 feet. Confrontation with pets often results in the pet being sprayed or bitten.

Skunks can also cause severe damage to gardens and lawns by their digging activities. While searching for grubs and other subsoil insects, skunks frequently uproot turf and other plants. This damage consists of small pits ranging from 3 to 5 inches across, or sometimes large sections of sod are rolled back.

Skunks are predators and can decimate ground-nesting wild bird populations and local populations of endangered species of small mammals. In addition, skunks can cause significant economic losses to egg/poultry raisers.

DISEASE

Skunks are the primary carrier of rabies in California. Approximately 65 percent of the skunks checked for rabies tested positive for the disease during the past 5 years. Rabies is a viral disease that is fatal in mammals, including man and domestic animals (dogs, cats, livestock). It is transmitted by the bite of an infected animal. Rabies is preventable in man and domestic animals through routine vaccination but is not curable after onset of symptoms. Vaccines developed for domestic animals have not proven to be reliable in preventing rabies in wildlife. California wildlife species have shown an overall increase of 7% in confirmed cases of rabies from 1978 through 1988. In addition to rabies, skunks can carry leptospirosis, listeriosis, canine distemper, canine hepatitis, Q-fever, tularemia, and trypanosoma. They are also heavily infested with ticks, fleas, and mites which are known carriers and transmitters of disease.

PROBLEM PREVENTION

Skunks are often attracted to residential areas by the availability of food, water, and shelter. They can be encouraged to leave by reducing or eliminating these attractants.

Remove unused pet food and water bowls at night, and keep tight fitting lids on garbage cans. Store pet food in animal proof containers. Gardens should be harvested frequently and windfall fruit picked up. Food should never be intentionally left out for wild mammals.

Seal up entry holes in and under buildings and decks. Keep pet access doors locked. Slotted metal vent covers are preferable to screen wire in keeping skunks from entering houses through foundation vents. Low backyard decks have proven to be extremely attractive shelters for skunks. They may be excluded by using 1/4 inch grid screening or solid metal flashing. Trench around the perimeter of the deck a minimum of 12 inches deep, insert screening in trench and backfill. Attach top of screening to facade of deck with nails or fence

post staples. This technique may also be used along fence lines to prevent skunks from entering yards and gardens. Before completing final seal on the last entry point on a building or deck, it is wise to make sure no animals are trapped inside. On the night before completing repairs sprinkle flour in the entrance hole, and check for tracks the following morning. If no tracks are evident for 3 consecutive nights, no animals are likely present. You may wish to make a temporary one-way exit using l/4 inch grid screening. Form the screening into a cone or funnel shape. The large end should be sized to encircle the entry hole and be attached over the hole to the facade of the deck or building with nails or fence post staples. The small end should face away from the building and be 4 to 6 inches in diameter so that skunks can squeeze out of the hole but not re-enter.

Skunks causing lawn and turf damage may be encouraged to leave by controlling grub worms and other subsoil insects. Chemicals to control these insects may be obtained at hardware or garden supply stores.

Poultry and egg losses may be eliminated by proper fencing and by keeping well maintained, secure coops. Exclusion of skunks from coops and poultry yards is usually the most practical and effective method to prevent losses. At night, poultry should be kept in skunk-proof sheds or houses. Ideally, poultry should be confined both day and night in a sturdy house combined with a predator-proof outdoor run area. This also provides protection from many other types of predators. Usually skunks are not inclined to break through material such as chicken wire which is intact and in reasonably good condition. Entry is usually made through open, weak or loose places in fences or buildings. Skunks are excellent diggers and may try to gain entry by digging under fences. Following is a check list of measures you can use to protect poultry from skunks:

1. Cover outdoor runs with wire mesh and/or suitable panelling material and fasten securely. If this is not practical shut poultry indoors at night.

2. Patch or repair all holes or weak places in existing wire or wood coops or runs.

3. Check all edges of overlapping or stapled chicken wire for tightness, and tie or staple securely.

4. Check ground edges of coop for tightness. You may need to bury fencing to a minimum depth of 12 inches.

5. Coop doors should be close fitting and sturdy. Beware of plywood doors which may have substantial warp at corners.

6. To prevent skunks from reaching in and grabbing poultry, night roosting or standing areas should be at least 12 inches away from cracks or wire mesh that is more than 3/4 inch square in spacing. Smaller size wire can be installed near roosting areas.

7. Other birds housed in wire or plastic cages should be kept within skunk-proof buildings at night. An alternative solution is to hang or suspend cages from ceilings at least 4 feet above the floor and 5 feet away from walls or fences.

DIRECT CONTROL

Shooting and live trapping can be used to remove skunks from rural areas. In urban settings, live trapping with baited 10x12x32 inch cage traps is the most desirable method. When trapping for skunks with an open grid cage trap, it is a good idea to cover the top, bottom, and sides of the trap with heavy cardboard or l/4 inch plywood. This reduces the chance that the person picking up the trap will be sprayed. The trap should be placed in the area of greatest skunk activity or near a suspected entry point. Do <u>not</u> place traps under a building or deck. This does not increase trap success, but it does greatly increase the chance of getting sprayed. Preferred baits for trapping skunks include raw whole egg, peanut butter, sardines, raw chicken parts, or pet food.

There are no Federally registered pesticides for control of skunks in or around buildings.

ODOR

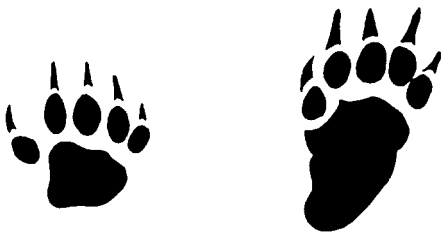
Individual reaction to skunk musk ranges from mild irritation to severe headache, nausea, vomiting, and burning of eyes and nostrils. No diseases are known to be transmitted through the musk. Skunk musk on clothing, outdoor furniture and other objects may be neutralized by a strong detergent washing followed by the liberal use of vinegar or household ammonia and a final rinse. Airing these articles on hot, sunny days will also help. To deodorize in or under buildings: maximize ventilation and place cotton balls saturated with a few drops of a strong commercial deodorizer, or Neutroleum alpha, or oil of wintergreen to give favorable results.

To remove musk sprayed on pets, first rinse the eyes gently with clear water, bathe with a "No Tears" shampoo taking special care around the eyes, then rinse with clear water. You may wish to rinse the pet with tomato juice or a dilute solution of vinegar and water. If you take this extra step, you must then shampoo and rinse the pet again. This treatment may need to be repeated. You may use any over-the-counter eye drops as a final soothing eye treatment. If your pet was bitten by the skunk, take it immediately to your veterinarian.

LAWS AND REGULATIONS

California state law does not classify skunks as endangered or threatened, nor as furbearers or game animals. There is no season or bag limit on skunks. It is against California state law for any wildlife to be kept as pets. Only <u>authorized</u> wildlife rehabilitators may keep injured or orphaned wildlife and then only for limited periods of time. California Fish and Game regulations prohibit the relocation of skunks and other wildlife without <u>written</u> permission of the Department. For further information on the legal status of skunks and other wildlife, contact your California Fish and Game Regional Office.

For further information or assistance in solving skunk problems contact the USDA-APHIS-WS State Office (916-979-2675) or the USDA-APHIS-WS District Office for your area.



FRONT HIND

TRACKS