

# WILDLIFE IN CONNECTICUT

## INFORMATIONAL SERIES

### EASTERN STRIPED SKUNK

*Mephitis mephitis*



**Habitat:** Fields, fencerows, wooded ravines and rocky outcrops. May also be found under buildings, in culverts and near garbage dumps.

**Weight:** 6 to 14 pounds.

**Length:** 21 to 26 inches. Males are somewhat larger than females.

**Diet:** Insects (especially grubs), small mammals, earthworms, snails, grains, nuts, fruits, reptiles, vegetation, amphibians, birds, eggs, carrion and garbage.

**Identification:** The eastern striped skunk's body is covered with fluffy black fur. It has a narrow white stripe up the middle of the forehead and a broad white area on the top of the head and neck, which usually divides into two stripes continuing along the back. The long, bushy tail is a mixture of white and black hairs. Some skunks have more white than black hairs. Skunks have a small head, small eyes and a pointed snout. Their short legs and flat-footed gait makes them appear to waddle when they walk. Sharp teeth and long claws enable them to dig in soil or sod and pull apart rotten logs in search of food.

**Range:** The eastern striped skunk occurs throughout southern Canada and all of the United States, except for arid areas in the Southwest, and in extreme northern Mexico. This mammal is common throughout Connecticut, although they are less common in the mountainous regions in the northwestern portion of the state.

**Reproduction:** Mating takes place during late February and early March. After a gestation period of 62 to 68 days, an average of six blind and helpless young are

born between late April and early June. At three weeks of age, young skunks open their eyes and begin crawling. At seven weeks, they begin to venture out with the female and are able to spray musk; they usually disperse during the fall of their first year. Adult males are generally solitary except during the mating season.

**History in Connecticut:** The eastern striped skunk is adaptable to a wide range of habitats but prefers areas of open fields with low, brushy vegetation. Early farming in Connecticut probably increased the suitability of habitat for skunks. As farms were abandoned in the late 1800s, the reverting fields continued to provide good habitat. But as this habitat progressed to mature forest, it became less suitable for skunks. The ability of skunks to adapt to various habitats has been advantageous to their populations over the years. The skunk's adaptability allows it to live in urban and suburban areas with only remnants of undeveloped land.

**Interesting Facts:** The skunk is a member of the Mustelid family, which includes weasel, mink, marten,

fisher and otter. *Mephitis mephitis*, the skunk's latin name, translates appropriately into "bad odor." All mustelids produce a strong smelling liquid from scent glands. However, the skunk is the only member which can spray its scent as a defense mechanism. The scent glands that provide this unique method of defense are deeply embedded in muscles located on either side of the rectum. These glands secrete a sticky, yellow fluid, the main component of which is butylmercaptan. The skunk is a good marksman and can spray accurately up to 10 feet or more. Skunks are mild tempered by nature and will not defend themselves by spraying unless they are provoked. They will usually stamp their front feet and arch their tail up over their back as a warning before spraying. If confronted by a skunk in this position, it is best to make a slow, quiet retreat. A skunk's spray is normally directed toward the eyes and may cause temporary blindness and nausea. Rinsing eyes with water will help restore vision. Tomato juice or diluted solutions of vinegar may eliminate most of the odor from people, pets and clothing. Clothing can also be soaked in weak solutions of bleach or ammonia.

Skunks are primarily nocturnal, although they are occasionally active during the day. They usually spend the daylight hours sleeping in their underground burrows. Skunks may dig their own burrows, but they prefer to use natural cavities among rocks, or under stone walls, logs or buildings. They will often use abandoned woodchuck burrows. Most burrows are six to 20 feet long and reach three to four feet underground, with two, three or four chambers. During winter, skunks sometimes den with other skunks.

Skunks are classified as a furbearer for which regulated trapping is allowed. The value of pelts and the level of harvest have fluctuated over the years. In the 1930s, skunk pelts were particularly valuable due to an increased fashion trend to wear fur garments and a decreased amount of fur available from other furbearing mammals.

**Management of Nuisances:** Skunks are one of the most common sources of wildlife problems experienced by Connecticut homeowners. Skunks will dig up lawns and gardens searching for insect larvae and grubs. They leave cone-shaped, divet-like holes, three to four inches in diameter and may also turn over larger pieces of sod. Controlling lawn grubs may reduce skunk

damage to lawns. Lawn treatment advice and materials are available from garden or hardware stores.

Turtle nests are also dug up by skunks searching for the eggs. Skunk predation on turtle eggs can account for a significant portion of egg mortality. Eggs of ground nesting birds will also be eaten if encountered by skunks.

Skunks will raid garbage cans for a variety of food scraps. Garbage cans should have tight-fitting lids and should be inaccessible to wild animals.

Skunks which have taken up residence under the porch or house can be excluded by covering all foundation openings with woven wire fencing. One opening should be left uncovered until no skunks remain under the building, such as when they have left to feed in the evening. This can be verified by seeing the skunks leave or flour can be sprinkled on the ground by this opening and checked periodically for footprints leading out of the opening. Once the skunk leaves, seal up the doorway with more fencing. You must be careful when using this technique since sealing burrows from early May to mid-August may leave young skunks trapped inside. Be sure all animals are out before sealing the final opening. Because skunks are adept at digging, any fencing may have to be buried at least one foot deep. Fencing will also help keep skunks out of gardens because they are not good climbers.

If a skunk happens to find its way into the basement or garage, leave a door open and let the animal come out on its own. To prevent future problems with skunks or other curious animals, keep basement and garage doors closed.

Skunks often become trapped in window wells. A flat, wide board placed at a low angle will usually allow the animal to climb out on its own.

Because skunks can carry rabies, they can no longer be live-trapped and relocated. Animals that appear sick or that are acting abnormally should be avoided. The following symptoms may indicate the presence of rabies or other neurological diseases in mammals: unprovoked aggression, impaired movement, paralysis or lack of coordination, unusually friendly behavior and disorientation. If you see this behavior, avoid the animal and notify your local animal control officer.



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