

# Living With Skunks

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"I never met a skunk I didn't like"

-- Anonymous

Skunks are members of the weasel family (Mustelidae). There are four species of skunk in North America: striped skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*), hooded skunks (*M. macroura*), spotted skunks (*Spilogale putorius*), and scarce hog-nosed skunks (*Conepatus mesoleucus*).

The striped and spotted skunks are common in San Diego County's rural and urban areas; the striped skunk is larger and more common than the spotted skunk. Although their markings vary, these bushy-tailed creatures are always black and white and absolutely unmistakable.

Striped skunks measure 20 to 30 inches long (including the wide, bushy tail) and weigh 6 to 10 pounds (about the size of a house cat) and have two wide, white stripes on their backs that meet on the head. Spotted skunks are about half that size with white spots instead of stripes. Skunks have small heads and eyes, pointed snouts, and short legs that make them seem to waddle. Their strong forefeet and long nails make them excellent diggers. They tend to be slow-moving animals, never in much of a hurry, and are generally poor climbers.

A litter of from one to seven young, averaging five, is born from late April to early June.

An individual's territory may span 30 to 40 acres. In the wild, skunks tend to den in shallow burrows or hollow logs. They are hardly ever found more than two miles from a water source. In urban territories, skunks den beneath buildings, decks, dumps, and woodpiles. They are capable of burrowing a den a foot or so underground, with well-hidden entrances. They like warm, dry, dark, and defensible areas; most house basements and crawl spaces qualify.

Skunks are generally nocturnal and begin foraging at sunset. Skunks are omnivorous and help keep the rodent population in check. They often travel five to ten miles within their territory at night looking for field mice and other small rodents as well as lizards, frogs, birds, eggs, garbage, acorns, and fallen fruit.

They also dig for insects, especially beetles, larvae, and earthworms. Their diet includes black widow spiders and scorpions. Being carrion eaters, they help keep roadways and neighborhoods clean. An estimated 70 percent of a skunk's diet consists of insects considered harmful to humans.

The skunk's chief enemies are automobiles and great horned owls, both of which kill skunks in large numbers. Skunks rarely attack unless cornered or defending their young. If approached by an intruder and unable to flee, a skunk will usually fluff its fur, shake its tail, stamp the ground with its front feet, growl, stand on its hind legs, turn its head and spit to scare the potential attacker. If those techniques do not work, it will lift up its tail and spray.

The chemical skunks spray at their enemies is a sulfur compound called N-bulymercaptan. It is ejected in a fanlike pattern from two small openings near the animal's rectum. The glands that produce the chemical hold enough for five or six full-powered sprays, but skunks seldom spray without warning or

cause. Although they have sharp teeth, they rarely use them in defense, because their spray is most accurate and effective at a range of up to 15 feet.

Having adapted well to neighborhoods, it's not uncommon to find skunks and domestic cats dining peacefully together. There have been cases of skunks entering homes through pet doors, dining with the family cat and finding a quiet closet or empty bed to spend the night. As long as the skunk does not feel threatened, it won't spray.

With their slow, waddling gait and bushy tail, these gentle mammals are delightful to see from a distance, and play an important role in keeping nature in balance -- the natural way.

"Snuggles," Photo by Shelor Brumbeloe, the Skunk Lady2snuggle.jpg (8088 bytes) Coexisting with Skunks

Skunks are very adaptable and often find food and nesting sites around human habitations. The best protection against them is to modify your habitat to limit resources available to them.

## TIPS

1.	Do not feed the skunks. They can easily become dependent on human food sources.
2.	Never leave pet food outside.
3.	Never discard edible garbage where skunks can get to it.
4.	Secure garbage containers and eliminate their odors. Use a small amount of ammonia or cayenne pepper in the garbage to discourage scavenging.
5.	A persistent, faint skunk odor around a hole leading under a foundation or deck indicates a skunk may be present. To find out, cover the hole with loose dirt; if a skunk is in residence, it will dig out during the night. Allow three days for this test; if dirt remains undisturbed, then close the opening with masonry, boards, or hardware cloth.
6.	Install one-way doors on entrances to skunk dens, allowing the skunk to leave at night but barring it from re-entering. Watch for any new holes. Do not use one-way doors during May through August, when babies may be in the den. If the mother cannot return, the babies will starve. This is inhumane and can also cause odor problems.
7.	Place mothball-filled socks and/or sprinkle cayenne pepper around your yard to discourage digging.
8.	Start a nontoxic insect- control program (especially for grubs) to discourage digging.
9.	Fences are effective as long as they are buried at least 1 1/2 feet in the ground.
10.	If a skunk strays into your garage, leave a door to the outside open and let the skunk exit on its own.
11.	Securely enclose poultry, especially at night. Repair all openings in coop or fencing. Fencing should extend 6 to 8 inches underground to prevent skunks and other animals from digging under.
12.	Debris and brush piles should be removed or stacked neatly to eliminate suitable cavities.
13.	Blow-up or plastic great horned owls may be strategically placed and periodically moved to deter skunks.
14.	Lighting up of denning sites and a portable radio may cause the skunk to seek a more suitable habitat.

15.	Keep pet doors closed at night to prevent illegal entry by a skunk.
16.	Keep fruit trees picked and don't leave rotted fruit on the ground.
17.	Restrict use of birdseed. Skunks are attracted to it and to the birds and rodents that use the feeder.
18.	If possible, eliminate outdoor sources of water.
19.	Battery operated flashing lights, tape recorded human noises, scattered moth balls and ammonia-soaked rags strategically placed may deter skunks from entering your yard.
20.	Trapping and relocation of skunks is not a recommended or viable alternative. Wild animals are territorial and like species will simply take over the area vacated by the relocated or dead animal.

## Sprayed by Skunks

If a person or an animal surprises a skunk in a situation where neither can retreat, the skunk will spray in self-defense.

Skunk spray in human eyes is extremely irritating and can cause temporary blindness, but no permanent damage. Flush eyes liberally with cold water to ease irritation. Wash skin with carbolic soap and water, tomato juice, or vinegar or Massengil douch. You may be able to save clothing by washing repeatedly in vinegar water and/or hanging it outside for a month or so before dry-cleaning. For the worst sprays, however, it may be best to discard or burn the clothing.

When your pet is sprayed, the quicker you take action, the more completely you can remove the odor. Wash your pet with tomato juice, Massengil douch, or diluted vinegar to counteract the chemical makeup of the skunk spray. Skunk Off and similar preparations containing neutroleum alpha, available from some pet stores, are effective.

Skunk Smell Remedy: 1 quart 3% peroxide, 1/4 c baking soda, 1 tbs liquid hand soap. Mix all three ingredients together. Shampoo animal thoroughly keeping out of eyes, nose and mouth. Soak 5 minutes. Rinse well.

Information provided by California Center for Wildlife and the Fund for Animals.

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