



Skunks

We often see skunks in the summer months and they can negatively impact humans, pets, and poultry. Skunks are Mustelids (members of the weasel family) and are well adapted to both wild and civilized settings. All have scent glands which secrete musk giving them a highly effective defense mechanism. The largest and most common Arizona skunk species is the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*). Striped skunks always have a thin white stripe on the face and the striping pattern can vary between individuals and populations. Striped skunks live almost everywhere but the most extreme deserts. Striped skunks prefer riparian habitats, are active throughout the year and do not hibernate even in northern Arizona; the males instead form communal dens with several females.

The closely related hooded skunk (*Mephitis macroura*) is the striped skunk's Mexican cousin. It is generally confined to southeastern Arizona, although specimens have reportedly been taken as far north as Flagstaff and the Mogollon Rim. The white stripes on this animal are often solidly joined to form one large white streak down the center of the back, or in some individuals, are so totally separated that the skunk appears nearly solid black. Like the striped skunk, it also has a thin white stripe on the face and shares a general preference for riparian habitats.

The American hog-nosed skunk (*Conepatus mesoleucus*) is also easily identified by its entirely white back and tail and lack of any stripe on the forehead. Moreover, the elongated and slightly up-turned snout is largely naked, and the long claws on the feet are almost bear-like in appearance. Like the hooded skunk, its range is mostly in Mexico, but includes a portion of southeastern Arizona, southern New Mexico, and the southern half of Texas.

The western spotted skunk (*Spilogale gracilis*) is the smaller skunk species reported in Arizona. The western spotted skunk's overall color is black with a white triangular patch on the forehead and a white spot under each ear. Five or six broken white stripes run down the neck, back, and sides, giving the impression of blotches or spots. The animal's hair is finer than that of the other species, and the tail is tipped in white. The spotted skunk seems to favor rocky, mountainous areas and it is more adept at climbing trees than other skunk species.

Skunks are more or less omnivorous and nocturnal. They feed on grasshoppers and other insects, grubs, worms, mice, young rabbits, lizards, bulbs, carrion, and garbage. Some individuals even take to raiding hen houses, taking not only the eggs, but chickens as well. However, they do not normally climb fences. All skunks produce from two to four young in April or May and the offspring are on their own by early fall. Few skunks live more than a year or two.

Skunks can become a nuisance in urban and suburban areas. The best long-term solutions to managing skunk problems are prevention and exclusion. Areas that are kept clean are less attractive to skunks. Remove all sources of debris from the yard where skunks could find shelter or food (rocks, junk, stacked lumber, brush piles, etc.). Pet food should not be left outside. It is best stored in a container that excludes rodents and insects. Seal holes in building foundations with hardware cloth. Where skunk activity is extreme, hardware cloth should be buried 12 to 18 inches underground.

Skunks are wild animals and, under most circumstances, should be left to themselves. Occasionally, they can become a nuisance warranting management action. Nuisance skunks are most often live trapped and relocated or euthanized. This is most often done by a Nuisance Wildlife Control Operator. Homeowners can also live trap skunks, but they may get more than they bargained for. Before taking any action, it is best for private citizens to consult their local Animal Control Officer.

Skunks are also highly susceptible to rabies infection. Early stages of a rabies infection may not have observable symptoms. However, 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. People should avoid skunks that are displaying these symptoms and report them to local animal control or other law enforcement authorities.

When encountered, give skunks a wide berth. Fresh skunk scent is very unpleasant and difficult to remove.



Striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*). Joy Viola, Northeastern University, Bugwood.org.

Additional Resource:

University of Nebraska, Lincoln, Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources
[Removing Skunk Odor](#)

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