



Striped Skunk *Mephitis mephitis*

Myth versus reality: does washing yourself in tomato sauce actually help after getting sprayed by a skunk? Read along to learn more about the smelliest mammal in North America! The striped skunk, *Mephitis mephitis*, is the most common of 5 skunk species in North America. In Oregon, its range overlaps with the range of the less common western spotted skunk. Striped skunks can be easily differentiated from western spotted skunks as the majority of the fur of the striped skunk is black, save for 2 white stripes that run along the top of its head to the tip of its tail. Western spotted skunks are smaller and have broken, white spotted coloration. Western spotted skunks also do handstands when spraying! Striped skunks measure between 46.5 and 81.5 cm (18–32 in) including the tail, and weigh between 0.7 and 6.3 kg (1.5–13 lbs), depending on season and region.

Habitat and Distribution

Striped skunks are present in much of the United States and range from southern Canada to northern Mexico. They do well in a variety of habitats, including urban habitats, however ideal habitats include open meadows and forests. Particularly in Oregon, open habitats at lower elevations are preferred due to increased foraging opportunities and milder climates. For shelter, striped skunks live in dens that they dig out themselves using their front claws. They also frequently repurpose burrows made by other mammals.

Diet and Behavior

Striped skunks are omnivores; they eat vegetation, small mammals, and insects. They play an important role as seed spreaders through the fruits and nuts they consume. They are also effective at pest control by eating a wide variety of insects such as grubs and beetles. Surprisingly, several skunk species enjoy eating bees and wasps as their thick fur makes them highly resistant to being stung! Striped skunks are nocturnal—mostly active at night—and spend the day in their dens.

Survival and Reproduction

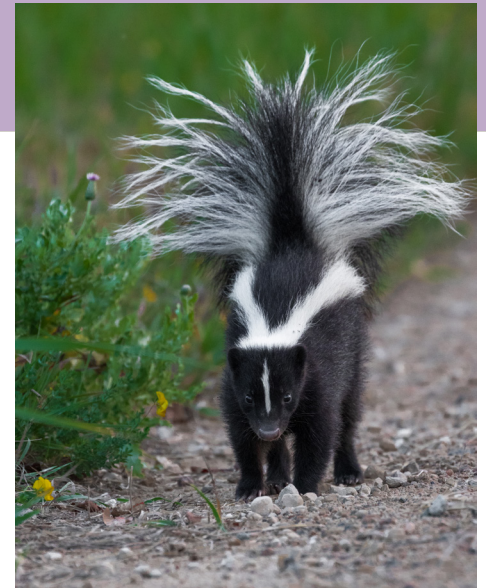
On average, striped skunks live around 7 years in the wild and can live up to 10 years

in human care. Human care mostly refers to care in zoos and wildlife centers, although some states allow striped skunks to be kept as pets.

Skunks are primarily solitary creatures until the months of February–April when breeding occurs for sexually mature individuals (at least 10 months old). After mating, gestation lasts between 59 and 77 days. This can be extended by up to 19 days through delayed implantation. Mother skunks usually give birth to between 2 to 10 young, called kits. Once the kits are born, they do not open their eyes until they are 3 weeks old. When the kits are fully weaned, the mother skunk teaches them how to “skunk” by foraging and hunting with them. Often, kits do not survive the first year of life as they are vulnerable to predators, especially during daylight hours. Common predators of the striped skunk include great horned owls (*Bubo virginianus*), barred owls (*Strix varia*), red-tailed hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*), coyotes (*Canis latrans*) and bobcats (*Lynx rufus*). That being said, skunks are able to protect themselves from predators as big as bears through their spray!

Skunks have the unique ability to spray a noxious sulfur-like substance out of glands under their tails. When threatened, they will begin their defense with a warning display that includes stamping their feet and raising their tails. Because skunks have extraordinary aiming abilities, they can spray directly into a predator’s eyes if they continue to feel threatened. This can cause a predator temporary blindness and pain. However, it takes days for the spray glands to be refilled, so the defense is used as a last resort.

Additionally, skunks exhibit aposematism—coloring or other signals that serve as a warning for predators. The unique black and white fur coloration of striped skunks serves as a warning, and a reminder, that it is best to stay away from a skunk . . . otherwise, you might get sprayed! This defense tactic is developed early in striped skunks, as they can spray at just 8 days old!



Striped skunk. USFWS/Mike Budd

Relationship with Humans

A skunk stinking up the neighborhood by burrowing under someone’s porch or stoop does not endear it to humans. It usually means a call to wildlife management or pest control to remove it. But while the skunk’s stinky reputation will live on, the narrative is shifting slightly, as many wildlife agencies highlight the important ecological role skunks play in their ecosystem.

Back to the reality versus myth of it all . . . washing yourself in tomato sauce after getting sprayed by a skunk does not help with the smell. Instead, try mixing hydrogen peroxide, baking soda, and dishwashing soap to create a neutralizing mixture that can chemically break down the noxious thiols in skunk spray. The more you know!

Where to See

In Klamath Network parks, the striped skunk is found in Crater Lake NP, Lava Beds NM, Lassen Volcanic NP, Whiskeytown NRA, Redwood NSP, and Oregon Caves NMP.

Learn More

[National Zoo](#)

[Oregon Department of Fish and Wildlife](#)



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