

Skunk Fact Sheet

INTRODUCTION

Two species of skunks occur in Georgia; the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) and the Eastern spotted skunk (*Spilogale putorius*). Skunks are members of the Family Mustelidae. Other Georgia Mustelidae family members include minks, weasels, and otters.

SPECIES DESCRIPTION

Striped Skunk

Commonly referred to as polecats, striped skunks are about the size of domestic house cats, measuring 21-28 inches in total length and weighing from 3-11 pounds. As one of the most recognizable mammals anywhere, striped skunks are known for their black fur and characteristic white stripes on their head and down their back. There is considerable variation in striping patterns including a broad stripe, narrow stripe, pair of stripes, or a short stripe. Coloration can vary as some striped skunks will have very little white while others are almost completely white.

Peak breeding activity for striped skunks occurs during February and March. Males are polygamous (having more than one mate at a time). As with most mustelids, delayed implantation occurs following breeding resulting in a synchrony of births during May and June after a 64-day gestation period. Litter sizes range from 2-10 skunks or "kittens" with six being the average size.

Eastern Spotted Skunk

Spotted skunks can also emit a putrid smell; hence the species name "putorius". Also referred to as civet cats, spotted skunks are considerably smaller than striped skunks measuring between 17 and 23 inches in length and weighing between 1 to 3 pounds. The black and white color is consistent with other skunks, however spotted skunks typically have horizontal white stripes on their neck and shoulders, irregular vertical and elongated spots on their sides, and white spots on the top of their head and between their eyes. In terms of color patterns, no two skunks seem to be the same.

Peak breeding activity for spotted skunks also occurs during February and March. Males are polygamous as well. Offspring are born in May, 50-65 days after implantation. Litters range between 1-6 "kittens" with an average litter size of four.

HABITS AND HABITAT

Skunks are perhaps most well known for their defense strategy. When confronted, striped skunks will face the threat, arch and elevate their tail, erect the tail hairs, chatter their teeth, and stomp the ground with their front feet. This warning usually convinces most to retreat, however if the threat remains the skunk will twist around, raise its tail straight up, and squeeze its anal glands spraying a foul secretion up to 15 feet away that may be detected up to a mile away. Spotted skunks will stand on their front feet and discharge their scent directly over their head. Contrary to popular myth, skunks can spray even when being held off the ground by its tail.

Most animals attempt to blend in to their environment for protection. However the unique and very noticeable contrasting coloration of skunks serves as sufficient warning to most would be mammalian predators. Great-horned owls, however, with their poorly developed sense of smell and nocturnal activities are a significant predator of skunks.

Striped Skunk

Striped skunks are the most common skunks both in Georgia and throughout the United States. They are found in a wide variety of habitats including forests, agriculture, and urban areas. Areas dominated by brush that are adjacent to grassy and forested areas (also known as edge habitat) are preferred habitat for this skunk. Although it may occasionally dig its own den, striped skunk will seek out shelter in crevices, abandoned burrows of other animals, hollow logs, or even underneath buildings or homes. During the winter they may den up in groups of several females with a single male.

Striped skunks eat a large amount of insects. Their diet includes a wide variety of beetles and their larvae, grasshoppers, crickets, earthworms, butterfly and moth larvae, spiders, snails, ants, bees and wasps, and crayfish. When insects are not available, their diet may shift to mice, vegetation, or ground nesting bird eggs.

Eastern Spotted Skunk

Spotted skunks are found in the more northern and eastern parts of Georgia as well as much of the Eastern United States. It is less common than striped skunks and occurs at considerably lower densities. Habitats they frequent include farmlands and other early successional areas with an abundance of "edge."

The diet of spotted skunks is more carnivorous than their striped cousins, feeding mainly on small mammals. They also eat grubs and other insects, as well as corn, grapes, and mulberries, and eggs.

NUISANCE AND DISEASE

Skunks are often considered nuisances, especially when they choose to den underneath homes, dig cone-shaped holes in yards looking for grubs, or simply the smell of their odor of being in the area. Making the area unattractive to skunks is one of the best ways to resolve nuisance issues. Steps to preventing nuisance skunk situations include: installing barriers to prevent skunks from getting underneath your home, not leaving pet food outside, removal of brush piles, and spraying your yard for grubs.

Skunks are a significant carrier of rabies in the United States. This status, as well as their propensity to use urbanized areas, makes them a serious potential source of human exposure to rabies. Other zoonotic diseases and parasites carried by skunks include leptospirosis and an intestinal roundworm-Baylisascaris columnaris. These diseases, in addition to distemper, canine hepatitis, fleas, ticks, lice, and mites can cause problems for pets as well.

UTILIZATION

Skunks are furbearers meaning they can be harvested for their fur. Historically their musk was used heavily in the perfume industry. Today, hunters and trappers do not typically target skunks but when caught, their fur is sold and used primarily in the trim trade.