
Mammal Conservation

Eastern Spotted Skunk



Spilogale putorius

General description

Spotted skunks (*Spilogale putorius*) are smaller than the more common striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*). About the size of a squirrel, the spotted skunk ranges from 325-650 grams (0.7- 1.4 pounds) and 250 to 688 millimeters (18 to 23 inches) in overall length (Chapman 2007). This compares to 1-5 kilograms (2-11 pounds) and 530-860 mm (21-34 inches) for striped skunks. Males are approximately 10 percent larger than females (Van Gelder 1959). Pelage is typically dark black with four to six broken white stripes, which give the animal the appearance of being spotted. (Striped skunks have highly variable patterns but always have a narrow white stripe down the center of the face and usually have two broad white stripes that meet on the crown of the head and extend to the sides of the rump.) The tail of spotted skunks is white tipped and bushy. An upside-down, white triangle-shaped nose patch and narrow white stripe behind the eye are also usually present.

Spotted skunks have well-developed scent glands that are used for defense. A curious behavior displayed by the spotted skunk is a headstand used in defensive posturing. The skunk moves toward the threat, balances itself on its forelegs and directs the anal sacs toward the opponent (Johnson 1921).

Status

The eastern spotted skunk has a global rank of Secure, and is currently ranked as apparently secure in South Carolina and Georgia. The species is considered rare or vulnerable in North Carolina and Tennessee. Kentucky, West Virginia and Louisiana rank the eastern spotted skunk as rare, imperiled and critically imperiled, respectively (NatureServe 2004). The species is not ranked in Florida.

No records of spotted skunks are included in the Georgia Rare, Threatened and Endangered Species Inventory and little is known about its true status in Georgia. Accounts are only known from

the Lumpkin/Union/White County line, Taylor County, and Chattahoochee County in Georgia. The species has also been documented in adjacent Aiken, Edgefield, Greenville, Oconee, and Pickens counties in South Carolina.

Distribution

The eastern spotted skunk's range extends from southern Pennsylvania, down the Appalachian Mountain range and into Florida. The skunk purportedly occurs statewide in Georgia except the Atlantic Coastal Plain. Unlike the striped skunk, which has a more uniform distribution within its geographic range, the spotted skunk is typically more localized in its distribution. Little is known about population distribution and size in Georgia and the species has been reported as rare and probably extirpated in many localized areas (Chapman 2007).

Primary habitats

The spotted skunk inhabits the same habitats as the striped skunk, the long-tailed weasel, least weasel, eastern cottontail and several rodents. It prefers dense cover like fencerows, embankments, gullies and hedgerows. Spotted skunks den in natural cavities or crevices, and in the burrows of other mammals and gopher tortoises. These animals are also found in rock outcrops, haystacks, woodpiles and abandoned buildings (Crabb 1948). Spotted skunks are generally less tolerant of humans than striped skunks (Henderson 1976).

Spotted skunks are primarily insectivorous, eating crickets, grasshoppers, beetles, earthworms and grubs. It will catch small mammals and birds, especially in winter and spring. These skunks also eat fruit, corn and other plant material. However, their diet varies seasonally with the availability of food items (Howard and Marsh 1982).

Threats

Habitat fragmentation, habitat destruction and public persecution of skunks are likely the most common challenges facing spotted skunk populations. As natural areas are developed, skunk populations are expected to decline. Because skunks prefer dense cover, which is generally not found in developed areas, habitat loss will likely lead to further population declines. Humans tend to be intolerant of skunks, so skunks that do not relocate as development occurs are often considered nuisance wildlife and sometimes removed or killed. The lack of knowledge about the distribution of the spotted skunk in Georgia represents another threat to this species. Little data about this species has been collected, and what little is known is the result of subjective reports from residents and conservation staff.

(Photo by Bob Gress)

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