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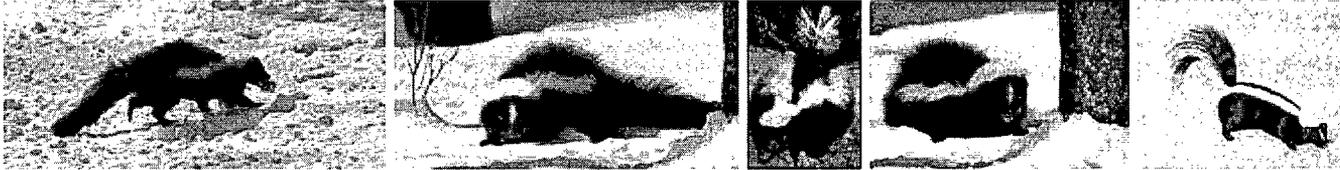
## ***Mephitis mephitis*** (striped skunk)

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By Christopher J. Wilke

### Geographic Range

Kingdom: Animalia  
 Phylum: Chordata  
 Subphylum: Vertebrata  
 Class: Mammalia  
 Order: Carnivora  
 Family: Mephitidae  
 Genus: *Mephitis*  
 Species: ***Mephitis mephitis***  
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Striped skunks are native only to the Nearctic region. They are found throughout much of North America, ranging from central Canada, throughout the United States, and south into northern Mexico.

### Biogeographic Regions:

nearctic [Q](#) (native [Q](#)).

### Habitat

*Mephitis mephitis* prefers somewhat open areas with a mixture of habitats such as woods, grasslands, and agricultural clearings. They are usually never found further than two miles from a water source. They are also often found in suburban areas because of the abundance of buildings that provide them with cover.

### These animals are found in the following types of habitat:

temperate [Q](#).

### Terrestrial Biomes:

chaparral [Q](#); forest [Q](#); rainforest [Q](#); scrub forest [Q](#).

**Other:**urban  $\mathcal{Q}$ ; suburban  $\mathcal{Q}$ ; agricultural  $\mathcal{Q}$ .**Physical Description****Mass**1200 to 5300 g; avg.  
3250 g  
(42.24 to 186.56 oz;  
avg. 114.4 oz)**Length**575 to 800 mm  
(22.64 to 31.5 in)

Striped skunks are easily recognized by their characteristic colors and pattern. The fur is black with a white stripe that begins as a triangular shape on the top of the head, forks into two stripes that travel down the sides of the back, and usually merges again near the base of the tail. Another white stripe runs from the base of the snout between the eyes and ends on the forehead. Stripe width and length vary with each individual. Stripes sometimes occur on the tail, but more often the tail is composed of both black and white hairs intermixed. *Mephitis mephitis* is about the size of a domestic cat, with a small head, small ears, short legs, and a long, fluffy tail. Feet are plantigrade with five partially webbed toes. Claws are longer on the front feet to aid in digging. The skull is distinct from other carnivores in having only one molar on each side of the upper jaw and two on each side of the lower jaw. The upper molars have a characteristic square shape. The dental formula is  $3/3 \ 1/1 \ 3/3 \ 1/2$ .

Total length varies between 575 and 800 mm, tail length from 173 to 307 mm.

**Some key physical features:**endothermic  $\mathcal{Q}$ ; bilateral symmetry  $\mathcal{Q}$ .**Sexual dimorphism:**  $\mathcal{Q}$ sexes alike.**Reproduction**

Males are typically polygamous and solitary. Males and females do not associate beyond the few days required for fertilization.

**Mating systems:**polygynous  $\mathcal{Q}$ .

Females are monestrous, but they occasionally can have a second estrous if the first pregnancy is unsuccessful. Mating takes place from mid-February until mid-March. The gestation period is between 60 and 77 days, with delayed implantation probably involved. Usually, five or six young are born in each litter. At birth, baby striped skunks are blind, deaf, and extremely immature. They nurse for about a month and a half in the mother's den. Fully weaned, the young then follow the mother about, finally breaking from the family about a year after reaching adult size.

**Key reproductive features:**iteroparous  $\mathcal{Q}$ ; seasonal breeding  $\mathcal{Q}$ ; gonochoric/gonochoristic/dioecious (sexes separate); sexual  $\mathcal{Q}$ ; fertilization  $\mathcal{Q}$ ; viviparous  $\mathcal{Q}$ ; delayed implantation  $\mathcal{Q}$ .

Female striped skunks nurture their young inside their bodies before they are born and then provide them with milk afterward. Male skunks provide no parental care.

**Parental investment:**

altricial ♀; pre-hatching/birth (provisioning: female, protecting: female); pre-weaning/fledging (provisioning: female, protecting: female).

## Lifespan/Longevity

**Longest known  
lifespan in wild**  
3 years (high)

**Longest known  
lifespan in captivity**  
15 years (high)

**Expected lifespan in  
wild**  
<1 years (average)

Up to 90% of skunks die in their first winter. In the wild skunks may live to be 2 to 3 years old. In captivity they have been known to survive for up to 15 years

## Behavior

Striped skunks are nocturnal, sleeping during the day in underground burrows and emerging around dusk to search for food. They prefer to use burrows made by other animals of equal size or natural burrows under tree stumps or buildings. They use their long front claws to build their own den if necessary.

Both males and females undergo periods of inactivity from November until March. Females often remain in their winter dens for the entire winter, but males usually emerge during mild temperature periods to feed. Winter dens usually consist of six females and their young. One male sometimes occupies a den with females, but usually lives alone in its own den.

### Key behaviors:

nocturnal ♀; motile ♀; sedentary ♀; solitary ♀.

## Communication and Perception

Striped skunks use scent marking to communicate presence and reproductive state to other skunks. They also communicate visually, by raising their fur and changing posture. Skunks have a good sense of hearing, but their vision is poor. They are mostly silent, but do make a variety of sounds such as churring, hisses, and screams.

### Communicates with:

visual ♀; tactile ♀; acoustic ♀; chemical ♀.

### Other communication keywords:

scent marks ♀.

### Perception channels:

visual ♀; tactile ♀; acoustic ♀; chemical ♀.

## Food Habits

*Mephitis mephitis* is a true omnivore, eating a vast assortment of things including insects, small mammals, fish, crustaceans, fruits, grasses, leaves, buds, grains, nuts, and carrion. Insects make up approximately 70% of their diet. Striped skunks are opportunistic and diet changes depending on the time of year and available resources.

**Primary Diet:**omnivore .**Animal Foods:**mammals; fish; carrion ; insects; terrestrial non-insect arthropods; terrestrial worms; aquatic crustaceans.**Plant Foods:**

leaves; seeds, grains, and nuts; fruit.

**Predation****Known predators**

- great-horned owls (*Bubo virginianus*)
- red-tailed hawks (*Buteo jamaicensis*)

*Mephitis mephitis* has perhaps the most widely known defense system of any mammal, the scent-spraying mechanism. Striped skunks usually do not discharge the foul smelling contents of their scent glands unless mortally threatened. When faced with danger they arch the back and erect the tail and hair. When mortally threatened they bend into a U-shape with both head and rump facing the enemy. They then emit two streams of fluid from scent glands located just inside the anus, which meet after travelling about a foot, finally spreading into a fine spray that can travel up to 2 or 3 meters. The spray often causes nausea and burns the eyes and nasal cavities of the unfortunate target. Because of their offensive odor, skunks are rarely preyed on by mammalian predators. Instead they are eaten primarily by large birds, such as great-horned owls and red-tailed hawks.

aposematic .**Ecosystem Roles**

Skunks help to control insect populations.

**Economic Importance for Humans: Negative**

Striped skunks sometimes eat crops and raid chicken pens, though this is rare. They are one of the primary carriers of sylvatic rabies and thus can be very dangerous to pets and humans. They can also cause some damage when building their burrows.

**Ways that these animals might be a problem for humans:**injures humans (carries human disease); causes or carries domestic animal disease .**Economic Importance for Humans: Positive**

Striped skunks, because of their diet, often eliminate insect and rodent pests that cause destruction of crops. In the past, skunk furs were of great importance to the fur industry, but skunk fur value has declined along with the industry. In the past skunk fur was used in the fur industry but its value has gone down. Skunks are also kept as pets, though this is illegal in most states because of their role in rabies transmission.

**Ways that people benefit from these animals:**pet trade ; body parts are source of valuable material; controls pest population.**Conservation Status**

Striped skunks are abundant and are not of any conservation concern.

## Other Comments

The spray from a skunk will not cause permanent blindness. Natural tears will quickly remove the chemicals from the eyes. It is very difficult to remove the scent from clothing, but ammonia, gasoline, and tomato juice are very effective at removing most of the smell after one washing.

There are four subspecies of striped skunks, most of which are separated by a massive barrier such as the Mackinac Straits. They differ mainly in fur coloration patterns.

## Contributors

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