

Solving Skunk Problems—The Sweetness of Skunks

Skunks are one of the most misunderstood wild animals. People don't realize that the skunk is a very docile, benign animal. However, their severe near-sightedness often gets them in trouble. Their odor is famous and strikes fear in everyone who encounters them. A skunk's only defense is a noxious odor created by a sulfuric acid "fired" from the anal glands. But skunks have a limited supply of ammunition and they can't "reload" very quickly, so they don't waste their defensive spray. Instead, they stamp their front feet as a warning if another creature gets too close, giving ample opportunity for the "threat" to back off. Skunks have a hearty appetite for grubs, frogs, insects, mice, and baby rats. People soon find that their rodent problems disappear after skunks take up residence.

SPRAYING REMEDIES

Q: I can smell skunk spray in my house—what should I do?

A: The nontoxic deodorizer Odors Away™ can be inexpensively purchased at hardware stores. It will instantly neutralize any bad odor indoors. Just put a few drops in a bowl, and place it in any room that smells. Add a few more drops every 24 hours.

Q: My dog has been sprayed. How do I remove the stench?

A: There are a number of widely publicized home remedies—such as tomato juice—which are ineffective at removing skunk odor. Wayward dogs can be instantly deodorized by a simple recipe.

MAGICAL SKUNK DEODORIZER RECIPE

For dogs, clothes, skin, etc.

* 1 quart 3% hydrogen peroxide

* 1/4 cup baking soda

* 1 teaspoon liquid dish or laundry soap

Mix these three ingredients together, then dip a wash rag in the solution and rub down the dog. Rinse and the odor will disappear within minutes! A word of warning: Hydrogen peroxide may give a dark-furred animal "rust-colored highlights."

SOLVING WILDLIFE CONFLICTS

Q: How do I get a skunk out of my garage?

A: Skunks commonly wander into garages when the door is left open. Open the garage door before dusk and sprinkle an 8-inch band of flour under it

so you can watch for a track of exiting footprints. Close the door after you ensure the skunk is gone.

Q: There's a skunk in my window well; why doesn't he jump out?

A: Skunks are poor climbers. If the window well is shallow (under 2 feet), place a piece of wood at an angle less than 45 degrees to serve as a plank. For traction, tack a towel or chicken wire to the board. If the window well is deep, place smelly cheese or canned cat food in the far corner of an animal carrier (or plastic rectangular garbage can tipped on its side) and slowly lower it into the window well. The skunk, enticed by the food, will walk right in. Slowly raise the can or box to ground level, elevator-style, keeping your hands on the outside of the container so you don't risk being bitten. The skunk will soon amble out. Skunks have terrible eyesight and will *not* spray you if you move slowly and talk softly. Remember, skunks also give a warning by stamping their front feet, which gives you a chance to back off. It's vital to then purchase or make a window well cover (out of heavy mesh) or this situation will repeat itself.

Q: Skunks are digging up my lawn! How do I stop this?

A: This is a seasonal problem associated with periods of heavy rain or overwatering. The skunks are merely digging up grubs that come close to the surface of the soil when the ground is wet. As soon as the soil dries, the grubs will descend, the skunks won't smell them, and grubbing activity will cease. Although unsightly, this activity will not permanently damage the lawn. The easiest solution is merely to wait it out. Also, be careful not to overwater your lawn. To repel the skunks, sprinkle cayenne pepper on the lawn, or spray a homemade mix of 1 cup castor oil, 1 cup liquid dish soap, mixed with a gallon of water (in a spray can) to deter the skunks from grubbing in certain areas. A long-term solution is to purchase Milky Spore™, natural, nontoxic bacteria that will spread in the soil and kill the grubs, from a local garden store. However, the bacteria spread slowly and may take over a year to work. We do not recommend commercial diazinon-based products due to potential toxicity to children, companion animals, and the environment.

In addition, skunks are often wrongly blamed for eating garden vegetables. They are actually

eating all the Japanese beetles, grubs, and other insect pests. To keep animals out of your garden, create an L-shaped barrier (see below).

Q: How do I get a skunk family out from under my deck/shed?

A: Skunks will take advantage of cavities under decks and sheds to raise their young. However, they are nomadic by nature and will usually leave when the young are old enough. The simplest option is to wait for the skunks to leave on their own, and then seal off their entry hole with hardware cloth. We don't recommend trapping because starving young are likely to be left behind. You can encourage the skunks to evict themselves sooner by spraying a repellent around your shed or poking some ammonia-sprinkled rags underneath, yet be careful not to poke the skunks!

Eviction: If you can't wait for the skunks to leave on their own:

1. Wait a few weeks until you see the babies come out with their mother (watch after dusk) and then seal their entry hole, as described below.

2. *Seal up the shed except for one main opening.* Place a pre-made one-way door (sold mail order by ACES, 800-338-ACES, or Tomahawk Live Trap Company, 800-272-8727) over that one remaining exit and leave it in place for three to seven days so all animals can get out but not back in. To ensure that all animals are out from under the deck before sealing it off permanently, put a layer of flour on the inside and outside of the door after installation, and leave it in place for one or two nights. Any footprints in the flour should be outside the door and none inside. *Do not try this technique until the young are mobile and start following the mother on outings. Otherwise young skunks will starve under the deck.*

3. If the problem occurs in late summer/fall, and you're sure there's only one animal underneath the deck, sprinkle white flour outside the hole and check after dark for exiting footprints. You can also put balled-up newspaper in the hole. If the newspaper hasn't moved for three to four days, the den has been vacated.

Repellents: The size of the denning space and the amount of ventilation will largely influence if a repellent will work. We recommend using ammonia-soaked rags, lights, and a blaring radio to convert an attractive space (quiet, dark, and protected) into one that is inhospitable. Here are some repellents that have proven effective at repelling skunks under certain circumstances:

1. A Castor Oil Formula

1 cup castor oil

1 cup liquid soap

mix these 2 ingredients together, then add: 1 gallon of water to a spray can. Spray around den area.

2. Hot Pepper repellent*

1 chopped yellow onion

1 chopped Jalapeno pepper

1 tablespoon cayenne pepper

Boil ingredients for 20 minutes in 2 quarts of water. Let it cool, and strain mixture through cheesecloth. Apply with spray bottle around the denning area. Don't spray too deeply into the hole or the skunk may reciprocate! It only lasts three to five days, so you will need to reapply if the animals' behavior is not modified. (*This information courtesy of Jack Murphy, Urban Wildlife Rescue, Inc.)

3. Cayenne pepper

Sprinkle around denning area.

Exclusion: *The necessary final step!* After completing one of the above steps, create an L-shaped barrier by covering the entry hole with hardware cloth and sinking it 4–6 inches into the ground. Then bend it at a 90-degree angle, away from the deck, for 8–12 inches to create a false bottom so the animals don't dig under the barrier. Check the next day for signs of digging from the inside to ensure that no skunk was sealed in.

Q: I have a cat door and found a skunk in my house. What do I do?

A: Try to isolate the skunk in one room by closing all doors and erecting barriers (such as screens or boards, which gently funnel the skunk back out the way he came in). Cat doors pose a continual problem because skunks and other wildlife smell the cat food inside and can't resist. We recommend eliminating cat doors altogether and training your cats to come for food at a certain time in the middle of the day, while nocturnal wild animals are sleeping! If you must have a cat door, either lock it at night (remember, skunks are generally nocturnal) or get the magnetic kind, which only opens when signaled by a collar on your cat's neck (available from RC Steele Company, 800-872-3773).

Q: There's a skunk in my pool. How do I get him out?

A: Skunks fall into pools fairly often because of their poor eyesight. You can easily save the skunk

by putting a pool skimmer or broom underneath him. Often the skunks are exhausted from swimming and may need some time to recover. If the skunk does not leave on his own after two hours, contact your local state fish and game agency to locate a wildlife rehabilitator.

Q: I see a dead mother skunk by the side of the road surrounded by babies. What should I do?

A: Contact a licensed rehabilitator to help you. In the meantime, you can put an upside-down laundry basket over the skunks so they don't wander off, and alert the police to your efforts.

Q: There is a skunk with a yogurt cup stuck on his head. What do I do?

A: Unfortunately, certain yogurt cups have a very dangerous design—the top has a small opening and rim that entraps a skunk's torpedo-shaped head. Skunks caught in these cups soon become dehydrated and oxygen-deprived, and starve to death. The skunk won't spray anything he can't see, so hold the yogurt cup firmly, in a gloved hand. Upon feeling resistance, the skunk will pull back and his head should pop out. Stand motionless, and the skunk will not see or spray you. Another less "hands-on" option is to put a laundry basket or milk crate over the skunk (with a heavy rock on top) to keep him from wandering, and then contact a wildlife rehabilitator. (Likewise, skunks will accidentally lodge their heads in dumpster drain holes that aren't properly screened. Contact a rehabilitator for assistance in this circumstance.)

Q: I set a trap for a woodchuck and caught a skunk. How do I get him out without getting sprayed?

A: This is a common occurrence when traps are left out all night. You can get the skunk out without getting sprayed just by moving slowly and talking soothingly. Remain motionless for a minute if he starts stamping his front feet and raises his tail, and then proceed when the stamping stops. You can drape a towel—slowly—over the trap prior to opening it to create a visual barrier. Once the trap door is opened, the skunk will beeline for home. If you must trap and relocate a woodchuck, remember to close the trap at night so another skunk doesn't get trapped inadvertently.

DISEASE AND SAFETY CONCERNS

Q: Do skunks carry rabies?

A: Skunks may contract their own strain of rabies (in central U.S.) or serve as a "spill-over" species for other variants. Since 1980, only one

human death has been attributed to the skunk strain of rabies anywhere in the United States! According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the few human deaths to rabies (on average two to three a year, nationwide) have been largely due to domestic bat strains or canine strains contracted overseas. It's important to take proper precautions by calling your local animal control officer if you observe a sick, disoriented-acting skunk in areas where rabies occurs.

Q: There is a skunk in my yard during the daytime. Isn't the skunk rabid?

A: Even though skunks are nocturnal, they sometimes forage by day, particularly in the spring, when they have young and may be extra hungry. If an adult skunk seen in the daytime is also showing abnormal behavior, such as paralysis, circling, unprovoked aggression, screeching, self-mutilation, or uncharacteristic tameness, call your local animal control officer or police department for assistance and keep all companion animals and children away from the animal.

Q: There's a baby skunk running around by day. Is the baby rabid?

A: It's possible, yet it's more likely that the skunk has lost sight of the mother. Watch to see if the baby finds the den or if the mother retrieves him. You can put a plastic laundry basket upside down over the skunk to temporarily contain the animal while waiting for the mother to return. Approach the skunk slowly and talk softly—if the skunk gives a warning by stamping the front feet, then stand still or back off. You can approach again after the animal calms down. As baby skunks get older, they sometimes come out to explore while the mother is away. Most of the time they don't appear without her, however. An orphaned baby will be frantic. If the skunk appears to be truly orphaned, call your local fish and game agency to locate a wildlife rehabilitator. Keep an eye on the skunk and keep all people and companion animals away.

Q: Do I have to worry about my children being attacked by a skunk?

A: Skunks are not aggressive. Again, their defense is spraying rather than biting or scratching. Due to their near-sightedness, skunks may wander up to a child, or orphaned young may follow a child, unable to discern that it's a person. These instances are infrequent, yet it is vital to teach your child to avoid any contact with wild animals and instead enjoy watching them from afar.

TRAPPING: IS IT NECESSARY?

Q: Do I need to pay a nuisance control trapper to solve my problem?

A: Although people's gut reaction may be to "get rid of the skunks," trapping will not solve the problem because skunks from the surrounding area will soon replace any removed. As long as there's skunk habitat, there will be skunks. Trapping merely creates turnover in the population.

In addition, nuisance wildlife control companies charge a fee—sometimes hundreds of dollars—for problems that homeowners often can resolve themselves. And when animals are trapped during the birthing season, starving babies may be

left behind. We discourage trapping unless an animal is stuck somewhere and can't get out, or poses an immediate threat to humans or domestic pets.

The answer is prevention through exclusion: animal-proof your home by sealing up all holes. For more information, contact The Fund for Animals' Wildlife Hotline at 203-389-4411.

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