



## MAMMALS

Status: Uncommon to Rare, Native Resident

---

# EASTERN SPOTTED SKUNK

(*Spilogale putorius*)

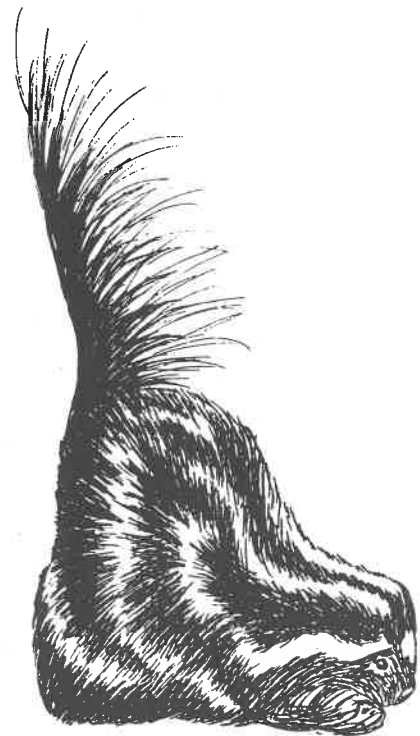
## Description

In South Dakota spotted skunks are often called civet cats. This common name is misleading since these animals are neither civets (members of the Viverridae family along with mongooses), nor cats. Spotted skunks, and their relatives the striped skunks, spray an offensive liquid to defend themselves. The scientific name, *Spilogale*, is taken from Greek and means spotted (*spilo*) weasel (*gale*). The species name is derived from Latin and refers to the awful smell of the skunk's spray. The Lakota word for skunk is maka.

Eastern spotted skunks have a deep black body and bushy tail with white to yellowish-white irregular stripes that are so broken that they resemble spots. White spots also occur in front of each ear and on top of the forehead. These animals are the smallest of the North American skunks with a length of only 13.5 to 22.5 inches (34-57 cm). Adult males weigh about 2 pounds (1 kg) and females about a pound (0.5 kg). These small skunks are more weasel-like in appearance than their larger cousins.

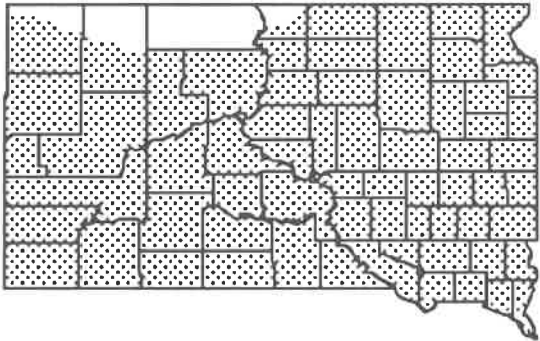
## Distribution

Eastern spotted skunks now are scarce over most of their range, although at one



time they were thought to be common in South Dakota. Today the species is uncommon in the south-central counties and rare in most of the rest of the state. A similar species, the western spotted

skunk (*S. gracilis*) may occur in western South Dakota, but its presence in the state has never been verified.



## Natural History

Spotted skunks are good climbers and are faster and more agile than striped skunks. They are more *nocturnal* than striped skunks and are seldom seen in daylight. When hunting they stay close to cover. These secretive animals are *omnivores*, but are more *carnivorous* than striped skunks. They will eat corn and wild fruits but they feed primarily on *carrion* of mammals such as rabbits and rodents. Because of their agility they are able to prey on birds nesting and roosting in trees. In the spring and fall many mice and frogs are eaten. During the summer, insects such as grasshoppers and crickets will comprise more than half of their diet. During the fall they must accumulate enough fat to get them through the winter. Although they don't hibernate they may sleep for a month or more at a time living off their accumulated fat, which can be up to 20 percent of their body weight.

Eastern spotted skunks are solitary except briefly during breeding in late March or early April. During this time the males increase their *home range* to 2 to 4 square miles as they breed with many females. Once the season is over, they return to their solitary ways and do not participate in raising the young. By May and June, 4 to 5 mouse-sized kits are born. They are

pinkish with a fine coat of hair and the alternating black and white colors are evident. After a month, their eyes and ears open. By 5 or 6 weeks of age they begin eating solid foods. They are adult-sized by 10 to 12 weeks and at 14 to 16 weeks, the young may disperse.

Spotted skunks live 6 years in captivity, but probably only 1 to 2 years in the wild. They defend themselves by stamping their feet, and, if the intruder does not leave, will stand on forefeet, raise their hind legs, and spray a jet of scent up to 11 feet. Spotted skunks have few predators except the great horned owl.

## Management Considerations

Most people's interactions with skunks are the result of an encounter with their spray. A bath with tomato juice will eventually take the odor out. The spray is not permanently blinding, but will cause temporary blindness when directly sprayed in one's eyes. When sprayed, the best action is to rinse the eyes thoroughly.

Skunks are susceptible to rabies. A rabid skunk is a dangerous animal. Its behavior is different from that of a healthy skunk; it is aggressive, out during the day, and unlikely to spray.

Skunks are furbearing animals that may be hunted and trapped by South Dakota residents who purchase a license and a furbearer stamp. Non-residents may hunt but not trap skunks in the state. Occasionally skunks may move in under a porch, in a garage or near garbage. These animals can be live-trapped and transported to another location.

It is not known why spotted skunk populations are decreasing in South Dakota. It has been suggested that they moved out onto the plains with the settlers and their farms. These small family farms provided habitat and food for the spotted skunk and their numbers increased. As land use patterns have changed from small farms to larger farms, the popula-

tion of spotted skunks has decreased. This might be due to such changes as removal of fences, fall plowing, less crop rotation to hay, and the use of herbicides and pesticides with a reduction in available food. Certainly more research is needed to fully understand the causes for this population decline.

### Glossary

**Carnivorous** - meat-eating.

**Carrion** - dead or decaying flesh.

**Home range** - the area an animal uses to provide its needs of food, water and shelter.

**Omnivore** - animal that eats both plant and animal matter.

**Nocturnal** - active at night.

### References

- Clark, Tim W. and Mark R. Stromberg, 1987. Mammals in Wyoming. Lawrence: University of Kansas, Museum of Natural History.
- Jones, Jr., J. Knox, and others, 1983. Mammals of the Northern Great Plains. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.
- Whitaker, Jr., John O., 1980. The Audubon Society Field Guide to North American Mammals. New York: Alfred Knopf.

### Selected Resources For Teachers

Shedd, Warner. The Kid's Wildlife Book: Exploring Animal Worlds through Indoor/Outdoor Experiences. Charlotte, Vermont: Williamson Publishers, 1994. A thematic unit could be based on the section on the weasel family, which includes skunks.

**Written by:**

Donna Graham, Rapid City, SD 57701. ©1997.

**Illustrated by:**

Kathy Colavitti, independent artist, Green Bay, WI.

**Reviewed by:**

Doug Backlund, Resource Biologist, S.D. Dept. of Game, Fish, and Parks, Pierre, SD.

Publication of the *Eastern Spotted Skunk* fact sheet was funded by the South Dakota Department of Game, Fish and Parks, Division of Wildlife, Pierre, SD.