



## MAMMALS

Status: Common, Native Resident

# STRIPED SKUNK

(*Mephitis mephitis*)

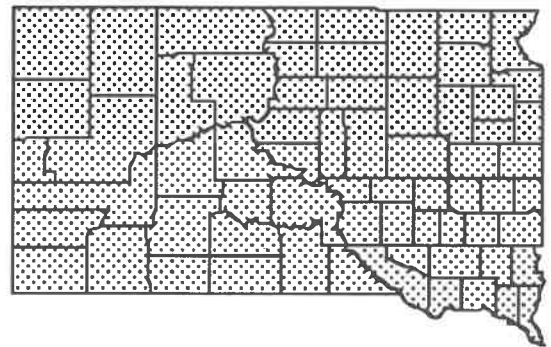
## Description

In South Dakota there are two species of skunks: striped skunks and spotted skunks. Both of these mammal species spray to defend themselves. This behavior is the basis for the striped skunk's scientific name, *Mephitis*, Latin for foul odor. The Lakota word for skunk is "maka."

Striped skunks are known for their striking black and white appearance in addition to their defensive spray. They are small mammals with a bushy tail, beady eyes, and a pointed black nose. They have long, black hair with a thin white stripe on the forehead. A white stripe on the back of the head splits at the shoulders into two white stripes that extend along the back. There is much variation in the size of the stripes. Striped skunks are about the size of domestic cats, with their length ranging from 20.5 to 31.5 inches (52-80 cm) and weight from 6 to 14 pounds (2.7-6.3 kg). The males are larger than the females.

## Distribution

Striped skunks are abundant throughout South Dakota. They live almost anywhere they can find adequate shelter, but prefer a woodland edge. Brushy areas,



rocky outcrops, open fields with wooded ravines, fencerows, and dumps all provide shelter and places to forage. Dense forests are usually avoided.

## Natural History

Striped skunks are solitary animals that are active at night. They are *omnivores* and will eat what is available and obtainable. Their diet varies with the seasons. During the summer, insects, such as beetles, grasshoppers, crickets, butterfly larvae, and spiders form the bulk of their diet. Fruits and berries are eaten as they ripen. Other food items include small rodents (mostly mice), shrews, moles, frogs, lizards, worms, turtle eggs, *carrion*, and garbage.

Striped skunks are aggressive hunters with a strong sense of smell. They will sniff out and then dig furiously with their front claws for insect larvae and mice. They can't climb so they forage almost entirely on the ground. In South Dakota, skunks must accumulate fat reserves to last 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.

Striped skunks hunt during the night and sleep during the day. When dawn comes, they locate a suitable sleeping place. They may dig their own den, use an abandoned den or any protected place, such as a hollow log, crevice or beneath a building. During the cold winter months dens will be deeper underground than summer dens and a nest might be made of dry grass and leaves. Striped skunks may den alone, with other skunks, or even with raccoons, rabbits and other mammals. If the weather is mild, they will be active, but if the weather is severe they will sleep.

The males mate with many females, but each female will only breed once each year with one male. The males do not participate in raising the young. Breeding takes place in February or March and the young are born in May or early June. The litter averages 6 with a range of 4 to 10 young. They are born blind with their fur already in a skunkly pattern. Their eyes open at 4 weeks. A mother skunk is fiercely protective of her young. She

grooms them often and carries them around with her mouth. Weaning begins at 6 to 8 weeks when the mother takes the young out on foraging trips. This is often when people may see skunks in their headlights, with the mother leading the young on a hunting expedition. The young leave home either in the fall or the following spring when they will start their own families.

Skunks are poor runners and are not equipped for a fierce fight so they defend themselves from predators by spraying. They can spray scent 10 to 15 feet, the mist may reach three times as far, and the smell may carry a mile. The fetid, oily, yellowish musk is produced in anal glands which hold about a tablespoon of liquid, which is enough for 5 or 6 jets of spray -- although usually one is enough. Before spraying, skunks usually face a threat, arch their backs, raise their tails, erect tail hairs, stamp the ground with their front feet, and shuffle backwards. Striped skunks can hit a target at about 15 feet, but greatest accuracy is at less than 10 feet. In addition to the odor, fluid in the eyes can cause intense pain and temporary loss of vision. Like other animals that defend themselves with a poison, skunks are boldly and distinctively colored so as to warn potential enemies not to bother them. Their enemies include foxes, coyotes and badgers, although the only serious predator of striped skunks is the great horned owl, which can attack from above without warning and doesn't have a sense of smell.

## Significance

Striped skunks eat large quantities of insects. They are valuable to agriculture because they eat such agricultural pests as cutworms, Colorado potato beetles, squash bugs, and grasshoppers, and mice. Because they eat quantities of insects they can be susceptible to poisoning by pesticides. Skunks are furbearers that are hunted in South Dakota.

## Management Considerations

In spite of the fact that skunks' eating habits generally benefit the agricultural economy in South Dakota, they are not much loved due to the terrible odor they emit. They are however valued for their fur. Every year thousands of skunks are killed for their pelts, which are worth about 2 dollars each.

Occasionally skunks may move in under a porch, in a garage or near garbage. Most people's interactions with skunks are the result of an encounter with their spray. A bath with tomato juice will eventually take out the odor. The spray does not cause permanent blindness, although temporary loss of sight might result from being sprayed directly in the eyes. When

sprayed in the eyes, the best action is to rinse the eyes thoroughly.

Skunks are susceptible to rabies. Because striped skunks are so abundant, any outbreak of rabies among wild *carnivores* is likely to include skunks. 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.

If a skunk takes up residence near your home or if you see one out and about during daylight hours, contact an animal control agent. Healthy animals can be live-trapped and transported to another location. Sick animals should be destroyed to prevent the spread of disease.

### Glossary

**Carrion** - dead or decaying animal matter.

**Hibernate** - to be in a state of dormancy in the winter in which metabolic activity and heart rate are reduced.

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

**Nocturnal** - active at night.

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