

Notable Natives

Striped Skunk (Polecat)

“Warning! My coloring should let everyone know to keep his distance!”

Coloration in nature often alerts other creatures that contact may be harmful. Animals from poison frogs to some fish to the brightly striped monarch caterpillar as well as skunks exhibit this characteristic. One can't miss the polecat's distinctive black and white color pattern.

Muphetis mephitis, the striped skunk common in northeastern Illinois, is in the mustelid family within the carnivore order. Mustelids share specialized musk glands that they use for marking territory and for defense; the skunk provides the best example. At one month of age skunks develop the ability to spray scent.

Their natural habitat is open woodland or forest edges. They have one litter a year of four to ten young born after a gestation period of sixty-three days. Skunks weigh between six and fourteen pounds. Their life span is about six years in the wild, and it is a species that often enjoys the opportunity to live out its natural life span. (Another such species is the porcupine.) Perhaps the only predator that doesn't fear skunks is the great horned owl.

Mustelids include the weasel group, (minks, sable, and wolverines), skunks, otters and badgers. They are found on most continents and comprise the oldest and most primitive group of carnivores.

Striped skunks are well-adapted to modern civilization, often nesting and spending the winter months under buildings. They do not truly hibernate but have periods of inactivity during bad weather. They are nocturnal and solitary although individuals may share a winter den.

Their diet is largely carnivorous with insects and small mammals constituting a major part of their diet. Suburban homeowners are quite familiar with their appetite for grubs as the skunks dig them out of the lawn. This is a short-term nuisance but longer-term benefit as skunks help decrease the larval populations of the Japanese beetles which thrive on the roots of lawn grasses. Skunks also eat eggs, fruit (primarily berries), corn, and nuts.

Skunks are beneficial to farmers, gardeners, and landowners because they feed on large numbers of agricultural and garden pests. They eat considerable amounts of animal matter



Skunk illustration by Beth Cripe.

during spring and summer when insects, their preferred food, are available, seeming to prefer grasshoppers, white grubs, beetles, and crickets. In autumn, skunks consume berries and other plant material. Field and house mice are regular and important items in the skunks' diet, particularly in winter.

However you may feel about seeing a skunk on your property, a mother skunk being followed across the yard by her young is one of the cuter sights in nature. They move at a relaxed pace, obviously confident in their ability to defend themselves without running away or engaging in combat. This trait is not a benefit to them when they cross roads, and many are killed by automobiles.

Skunks are a major vector for rabies, and one should not approach them. However, healthy skunks are non-aggressive beings and rarely spray unless attacked (as by a dog). They would rather walk away than haphazardly expend their musk (which takes energy to create). When treated with respect, they are an environmentally friendly and interesting addition to one's backyard habitat.

— Carol Rice