

Wildlife Diversity Notebook: Striped skunk

By Art Shomo

Common Name:

Striped skunk, polecat

Scientific Name: *Mephitis mephitis*

West Virginia Status:

Common throughout the state.

Description: The striped skunk's body is black with two broad white stripes on its back, starting at the tail and joining in a cap on its shoulders and head. There also is a thin white stripe down the center of its face. Its bushy tail is black, often tipped or fringed with white. The stripes vary in length and width among individuals. The male and female look alike, but the male is larger. Adult skunks measure about 24 to 30 inches in length and weigh 6-14 pounds. They have small heads, eyes and ears, and a pointed nose.

Habitat: Striped skunks live in a variety of habitats. They prefer a mixture of woods, thickets, shrubby areas and fields, but avoid dense forests. They are usually found in areas with good cover, including cornfields, brushy borders of waterways, hayfields and fencerows.

Range: Almost all of the United States, southern tier of Canadian provinces, northern Mexico; from sea level to timberline.

Diet: Striped skunks are omnivorous. Their choice of food depends on what is available. In summer, they feed heavily on insects – adult and larval forms – including grasshoppers, crickets, beetles and wasps. In suburban areas they will use their long claws to dig up lawns to eat grub worms. They also will eat spiders, toads, frogs, lizards, mice, chipmunks, and the eggs of turtles and ground-nesting birds.

In fall and winter, skunks eat fruit, including wild grapes, Virginia creeper berries, and cherries; small mammals such as mice, voles and moles; plants, including grasses, leaves and nuts; and carrion.

Conservation and Potential Threats:

No threats within the Mountain State.



Jacob Dingel/PGC Photo

Life History: Although solitary for most of the year, males and females get together to breed in February and March. Males travel widely in search of mates and breed with several females if possible. Shortly after mating, the female drives off the male. After a 60-day gestation period, she bears four to seven young, each weighing less than an ounce. The young are born blind with little hair, although the future black-and-white pelage can be seen on the pinkish body. The scent glands can spray at three to four weeks of age. Weaned at six to eight weeks, the young then venture out with their mother at night to hunt for food.

The young are fully grown by November. During the fall, skunks gorge themselves to store up fat to help sustain them during the long winter. Striped skunks don't hibernate, but they may stay in their dens for weeks at a time during harsh winters and may lose 10-30 percent of their body weight. They often use abandoned dens of other animals, but can use their long claws to dig their own dens. They may also take refuge beneath a building.

The young sometimes overwinter with their mother in an underground den. Dens have been found containing 12 or more skunks.

Skunks are best known for their chemical defense. The pair of scent glands have nozzle-like ducts that protrude through the anus. When threatened, they use a quick muscular contraction to shoot the pungent, oily musk up to 15 feet. The main active ingredient of the musk, creamy or yellowish in color, is the sulphide mercaptan. Skunks can aim the spray in any direction by twisting its rump and can even spray when held up by the tail. Before spraying, a skunk usually tries to bluff its enemy by drumming its forefeet, snarling, clicking its teeth, arching its back and raising its tail. If those messages fail to discourage the intruder, it then uses its ultimate, chemical weapon. Humans use the musk, after the odor is removed, as a perfume base because of its clinging quality.

Although its odor repels most predators, the skunk is prey for great horned owls along with some larger mammals, including coyotes, foxes and bobcats. They also fall victim to diseases such as rabies, getting hit by vehicles, and starvation. As in other states, skunks can be hunted and trapped, although the demand for their pelt is low.

Skunks are usually sluggish and move at a deliberate walk or slow trot, with a top speed of about 10 miles per hour. They can swim but are poor climbers. Their sight, smell and hearing are average at best compared to other mammals, but they possess an acute sense of touch.

Like many mammals, a skunk's pelt is composed of soft, wavy underfur covered with long, coarse guard hairs. They molt each year, beginning in April and ending in September.