

The Skunk

The skunk belongs to the mustelid family, which also includes animals such as mink, otter, pine marten, badger and weasel. There are a number of different types of skunk but the one that is most identifiable to us is the Striped Skunk which has a distinctive white stripe down its back and along its tail.

About the size of a domestic cat, the Striped Skunk is 55–75 cm long (including its long bushy tail) but its short legs means it is not very tall. It has a triangular-shaped head, that tapers down to a rounded nose, and has small ears and black, beady eyes. Each foot has five toes, with long, curved claws on the front feet and shorter, straighter claws on the back feet.

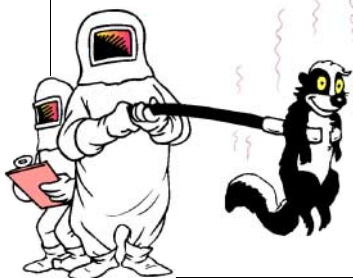
The Striped Skunk is an omnivore, eating animals and plants. As it is a nocturnal animal, it usually eats at night and sleeps during the day. Its diet includes plants, fruit, insects, worms, eggs and small mammals.

A female skunk usually has one litter each year of about five to six young. These are usually born from early May to early June, without much hair, but do have the faint black and white markings. Skunks usually live for two to three years. In captivity, they have been known to survive for up to 15 years.

Oh, what a smell!

Skunks are famous for the smell they can discharge. If threatened, a skunk will arch its back, fluff up its fur and lifts its tail. If the skunk's warning is ignored then it stands on its front feet, with its rear legs in the air and ejects a foul-smelling liquid at the aggressor from glands underneath its tail. The glands contain about one tablespoon of a thick, yellowish and oily liquid. The skunk has great control over the glands and can direct the liquid in specific direction. Sometimes the mist can travel up to 3 metres. The

substance can be painful to the eyes but doesn't cause permanent blindness. The smell is strong enough to be detected up to 2 kms from where it has been discharged!



Where does the Skunk live?

The Striped Skunk is native to Northern America and can be found from Canada, all the way down to New Mexico. There are a few other varieties of skunk and most of these are found in the Americas. However a relatively new addition to the skunk family can be found in Asia and it is known as the Asian Stink Badger!

The Striped Skunk often lives alone, but sometimes it may gather with others in a winter den. It inhabits lots of different habitats but prefers the edge of forests, bushy areas or grasslands. It is able to dig a den but more often uses those made by other animals, and sometimes even lives in caves, piles of rock and sheds. A source of fresh water is usually close by.



Photo courtesy of Erwin C. Nielsen/Painet Inc.

The Striped Skunk