

What to Do About Skunks

A gentle species rarely worth raising a stink over
Adapted from the book Wild Neighbors



Skunks, easily identifiable by their characteristic black and white striping, are infamous for producing a foul odor when frightened. Although a skunk's spray is known mostly for its robust smell, it can also cause intense discomfort if it gets into a person or animal's eyes.

Fortunately, these mild-mannered creatures rarely use this potent defense, and provide quite a few benefits to the areas they inhabit.

In cases where eviction is necessary, a few mild harassment and deterrence techniques can help you humanely remove skunks while escaping smell-free.

Common Conflicts and Solutions

It is more likely you will smell a skunk than see one. Persistent, faint musky smells under a building or woodpile may suggest that a skunk has taken up residence.

You may find small, shallow holes in the lawn, similar to those made by squirrels, which are a result of a skunk foraging for grubs. Occasionally, you may even find plants knocked over or damage to the lower leaves or ears of ripening garden crops, including corn. You should look for these additional clues; foxes also have their own musky scent that may cause misidentification.

Skunk Encounters

Occasional skunk sightings in a neighborhood are not a cause for alarm. Because skunks are generally easy-going, they will not intentionally bother people. In fact, skunks may benefit humans by eating many insects and rodents many regard as pests.

Warning signs to heed

Skunks use their powerful defense only when they or their young are threatened and cannot escape. Even then, they give ample warning that should be heeded — stamping front feet, a raised tail, hissing, short forward charges and twisting their hind end around in your direction. Spotted skunks will even

contort into a characteristic handstand, rump in the air with eyes still fixed on the threat.

Move away slowly and quietly. By nature, dogs tend to ignore these warnings, so it is important they be restrained for their own good.

Tolerance

Because of the lingering odor, and fear of being sprayed it may be hard for some people to tolerate skunks living under a deck or old shed. But skunks need shelter when they are most vulnerable (during the coldest parts of the winter and when raising young).

The nocturnal habits of skunks, their non-aggressive nature and the beneficial role they play are all good reasons to leave them alone until they have moved on their own accord (which they readily do) or can safely be encouraged to leave an area where they are not wanted.

Protecting your Yard

Skunks are opportunists at heart — they're mainly attracted to low-hanging fruit like garbage and pet food left out at night, as well as convenient denning sites, such as wood and rock piles, elevated sheds, openings under concrete slabs and porches and crawl spaces.

Preventive measures, such as removing attractants around houses, will decrease the likelihood of an unpleasant skunk encounter. This includes securing trash, covering window wells, feeding pets indoors, or if fed outdoors, removing food immediately after pets eat.

Skunks also dig for grubs in lawns when wet soil conditions push grubs close to the surface — their presence may be a sign of an overwatered lawn. Occasionally, however, a skunk may also wander into an open garage or shed, which is a compelling reason to secure all outbuildings.

Preventing Denning (exclusion)

Exclusion techniques should be used proactively to prevent denning before an animal moves in. Any suspected skunk den should first be checked to determine if it has residents.

This may be done by loosely filling the hole (or holes) with soil, leaves, straw, crumpled paper or similar material. If a skunk is present, the animal will easily push their way out overnight and reopen the hole.

If the plug remains undisturbed for two or three nights, it is safe to assume that the hole is unoccupied and can be filled. In the winter, skunks may remain inactive for longer periods, so provide them with a bit more time to disturb the plug before blocking the den entrance. Permanently exclude skunks (and other den-seeking creatures) with an L-shaped footer of welded wire or similar barriers.

If a skunk is using the den, either harassment or eviction using a one-way door system is recommended. When evicting skunks, be sure that dependent young are not present. When in doubt, assume they are and use the door only after they start following their mother to forage. Leave the door in place from two or three nights to a week to be sure the skunk has left.

Harassment

When it is safe to displace skunks, mild harassment can be very effective. This can be as simple as loosely repacking the den hole with leaves or straw or other material to see if the skunk gets the message and moves elsewhere. If they require more persuading, adding light and noise to make a dark and quiet denning space unattractive may help as well. Make sure the skunk is not close by before setting up the disturbances.

About Repellants

Repellants may also be effective in skunk deterrence. Mild repellents, such as used kitty litter, can be placed near or inside the den to one side so the skunk has to pass them to get out; commercial or homemade capsaicin or castor oil repellents may also be tried.

Avoid buying skunk deterrents that are based on predator urine — these products are created under inhumane conditions, and are not necessary to repel skunks effectively.

Stronger products, such as the powerful capsaicin-based “hot sauces,” are often unnecessary — in the case that they are used, they must be treated with extreme care due to the consequences for people, and animals who may inadvertently come into contact with them.

Neutralizing odors

The traditional remedy for removing the smell of skunk spray is a tomato juice bath. However, tomato juice, in conjunction with vinegar, only serves to reduce the stench, as it doesn't neutralize the molecules that make skunk spray particularly pungent. Here's a particularly effective remedy that's safe for dogs and cats, as well as humans:

Mix together:

- 1 quart of 3-percent hydrogen peroxide (available at any pharmacy)
- 1/4 cup baking soda
- 1 teaspoon liquid dishwashing soap

Wearing rubber gloves, wash with this solution immediately after the spraying occurs. DO NOT get the solution in eyes. (If you don't have peroxide, baking soda, and liquid soap on hand, use vinegar diluted with water.)

Caution: Do NOT store this mixture or make it ahead of time, as the mixture could explode if left in a bottle.