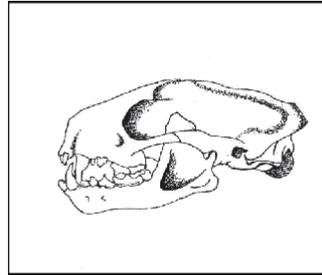
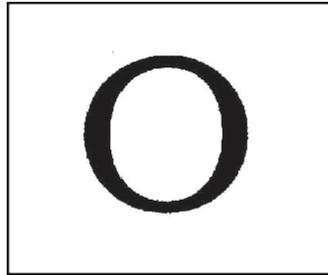


## Skunks Family Mustelidae



**Let's face it. Skunks can stink.** Other mustelids have similar musk glands. The tiny least weasel can spray its musk, but you would probably never know it. Not so the skunk. The only creature not aware that a skunk has sprayed its musk is one without a sense of smell.

Not only is skunk spray an effective weapon to ward off a predator, but it is a weapon with staying power. Few animals ever forget the noxious odor. That **“odor memory”** helps the **slow-moving skunk** avoid continuous contact with predators. Most animals remember the sight and smell and detour around the skunk. **The skunk's bold black and white coat serves as a warning as well.**



**Whooo cares if skunks stink?** Not a great horned owl. Like most birds, owls have no sense of smell. These large owls are more than capable killing a large skunk which weighs a lot more than the owl weighs. Great horned owls are one of the few predators that can tolerate getting sprayed by a skunk and get close enough to a skunk to kill it.



**Skunks discharge their musky scent** from nozzle-like ducts found in scent glands located on either side of their rectum. The oily liquid has an active sulphide ingredient called mercaptan. No matter the name; it's awful. If sprayed into the eyes, it can temporarily cause blindness.

**Skunks can spray up to twelve feet** by twisting their hind end toward their target. First they warn their enemy by drumming their forefeet on the ground and snarling. Only as a last resort they will arch their back and raise their tail to spray. Just so you know . . . skunks can still discharge their musk when held by their tail. So don't do that!

**Striped skunks are easy to identify** by their **black coat and bold white stripe** running the length of their body. Sometimes they have a V-shaped mark over their shoulders with two stripes instead of one. Stripes can also vary in length and width. The black, bushy tail is usually tipped white. Males, females and young are all marked alike.

An adult may be **two feet long, including a 10-inch tail, and weigh up to 12 pounds**, depending on the time of year. The head is small and triangular with a stocky body and short legs. Their eyes are small and dark, the ears small and rounded.

**Skunks are plantigrades** like raccoons and bears, and the bottoms of their feet are hairless. They are superb diggers, aided by **long, sharp claws on their small forefeet**. The hind feet have shorter claws. Each foot has five toes. Even though skunks are not aquatic or even semi-aquatic, they have **slightly webbed toes** and can swim.

**Skunks are slow movers and poor climbers** with only a fair sense of sight, smell and hearing. But they do have a superb sense of touch, and of course, an ability to drive off predators with their offensive spray. They can make a variety of sounds, including hisses, growls, squeals, soft cooings and churrings depending on their circumstances.



The **striped skunk** (*Mephitis mephitis*) is the species most commonly found in Pennsylvania. Like many of our animals, its name comes from Native American culture. Algonquins called the animal “seganku.” Polecat is another common name.

**Spotted skunks** (*Spilogale putorius*) are only found in the southwestern portion of our state. They are smaller than the striped, weighing in at only about 2 pounds. Their black coat has a checkering pattern of white markings, and a triangular white spot on their forehead.

**Like the striped skunk, the spotted skunk will issue a litany of warnings before it sprays**, including performing a “handstand” on its forefeet. If that doesn’t work, it will resort to whipping its body into a “U-shape” with both head and tail pointed at the threat before unleashing a well-aimed oily squirt.

**Skunks are nocturnal omnivores.** During summer nights, they feed heavily on insects, both adult and larval forms, including pests like grasshoppers, wasps, bees, potato bugs and even Japanese beetle grubs.

**Their claws help them dig out their food.** If you find small cone-shaped holes in your yard, you probably have a skunk feeding on soil grubs. They’ll also prey on spiders, toads, frogs, lizards, snakes, mice, chipmunks and the eggs of turtles and ground-nesting birds. During fall and winter, skunks will eat wild grapes and cherries, grasses, leaves, buds and mast (such as acorns). They will also take carrion when they find it.

**Skunks den in abandoned groundhog burrows** or find burrows in hollow wood or rock piles. They will also burrow beneath porches or outbuildings, to the dismay of many homeowners.

**Skunks do not hibernate. Instead, they live off accumulated body fat to get them through the winter.** However, they will den up and sleep for extended periods in the worst of winter weather. Males will wander from den to den to **breed** with as many females as possible in **late February to early March**. They only breed once each year, bearing 5–7 kits on average. Although blind and naked at birth, the pattern of their future black-and-white markings is visible on their pinkish, wrinkled skin. Their scent glands are functional at only three weeks of age, and they are able to leave the den with their mother at two months. By autumn the family starts to disperse, although some kits will remain with the mother until the following spring.



## A Simple Review of Skunks



I'll bet you didn't know that skunks and ducks have something in common, but they do. **Skunk kits follow their mother in a single file, waddling after her just like ducklings follow their mother.** That cute trait is about all they share.

**Skunks are famous for their powerful, awful-smelling spray.** That spray is an oily liquid produced by glands under its large tail. To release this scent bomb, a skunk will turn around to discharge the foul mist.



**Don't startle a skunk.** They can spray up to 12 feet. If it stamps its feet, does a handstand or bends its body into a "horseshoe" shape, get away! You are being warned that something awful is on its way.

**Skunks live in a variety of habitats:** woods, fields, farms, even neighborhoods. They rest during the day. **They will hunt at night eating just about anything edible:** insects, small animals, eggs, corn, fruits, fish and even dead animals.

**Most skunks are the size of a large house cat.** Some are striped, spotted or have a swirled pattern. But they all have bold black-and-white markings that make them easy to remember, especially a predator that has been at the wrong end of a skunk.

**Skunks will sleep off and on all winter,** but they do not hibernate. Food may be hard to find in winter so before it gets really cold, skunks try to fatten up to be well-prepared. They will use dens for periods of winter sleep and raising their kits. Dens may be in burrows built by other animals or in hollow logs or even abandoned buildings.



**Females give birth to about 5–7 young kits each year within the dens.** Even after the kits leave the nest with their mother they will stay close to her, sometimes until the following spring, when she gives birth to another brood.