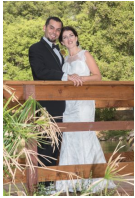
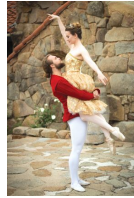




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## Nature News: The Fascinating World Of Skunks



A small litter of striped skunks was recently dropped off.

By Angela McLaughlin - Julian Journal • Thu, Mar 22, 2018

Living in the backcountry certainly has its advantages and disadvantages — the wide-open spaces and beautiful landscapes are a draw for many. But this landscape comes with a variety of wildlife that humans encounter, and it is important to learn more about the different species in order to peacefully coexist with them.

Easily recognized by appearance as well as odor, skunks are one of the better-known animals that humans cohabitate with — and the more commonly found striped skunk is what most of us think of when we picture the animal.

You may have also heard them referred to as "polecats." Unfortunately, skunks have gotten a bad reputation, mainly due to their recognizable and unwanted smell. But these black-and-white critters do more good than harm.

Skunks are omnivores, and most of their diet revolves around other animals that we consider pests — such as black widow spiders, scorpions, snails, slugs and more. The long claws on their front feet are perfect for digging up grubs; they're not going after vegetables or flowers in the garden, they want the snails and slugs. Skunks also help clean up overripe fruit that has fallen to the ground, and have been known to prey on nests of baby mice.

Striped skunks are by far the most common. There are other types out in the deserts, more in Arizona (hog-nosed and hooded). They are close relatives to other animals that have scent glands, such as weasels and martins. Though striped skunks are more common,

spotted skunks may also make an appearance here in the backcountry. Spotted skunks are smaller than their striped counterparts, are longer and leaner like a weasel, and are part of a different genus. They are not really around the traditional urban areas. They are more rural and generally found at chicken coops, where they will eat grain, eggs and occasionally baby chicks.

But what about that smell?

"Their coloration is a warning," says Gina Taylor, Registered Veterinary Technician and animal caregiver at the Fund for Animals Wildlife Center (FFAWC) on Highland Valley Road in Ramona. "They don't see very well, and that's why they tend to warn you. That striking black and white is a warning to would-be predators."

Taylor adds that if the coloration doesn't deter an animal, the skunks' next step is to "stomp" on the ground in warning. This normally occurs prior to the animal spraying, as they have a limited amount of liquid to work with.

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"And they have very good aim when they do spray."

Humans may be adept at reading these warning signs and backing away before a spray occurs. But household pets, such as dogs, are normally not as skilled. It is important to keep an eye on pets to avoid unwanted encounters with wildlife. Not all runs can be avoided — check out the sidebar for a recipe to remove skunk odor.

As baby season is in full swing, people may notice more skunks moving about. Females typically have up to six babies — called "kits" or "kittens" — and have strong maternal instincts. The kits are born with their eyes and ears closed, much like kittens and puppies, and are very dependent on their mothers. The scent glands develop when they are merely ten days old.

According to Taylor, the young skunks will stay with their mother for many months, even after they are weaned.

"They don't necessarily have just one den," says Taylor. "They are pretty nomadic, but they do come back to favorite spots."

If you do happen upon them, stop and let it move along. Back off and give them time. They're probably just passing through a property. In order to avoid attracting them, Taylor says the area should not be a comfortable place for them to hang around. She advises against leaving pet food outdoors at night, as skunks are nocturnal. Make sure to put trash in secure containers, as skunks have a sweet tooth and will get into trash for yogurt containers, avocados, etc.

Skunks often return because they continually find something they need, such as food. If a skunk has set up residence in an unwanted area, Taylor says homeowners may use tennis balls or old rags soaked in ammonia, placed near the area, as a good way of evicting them.

"They have a very good sense of smell, and they don't want to be around it," she says.

Additional lights, or turning a radio on, are other deterrent methods that may work well in getting skunks to leave. This process of making the animal move on is referred to as "hazing."

Taylor advises against trapping and relocating them, as it only creates space for another animal to move in, and poses problems for the relocated skunk.

"They won't know the territory, or who is friend and foe," said Taylor. "They don't know what food is safe or where the water source is. We just want them to move along on their own."

Natural predators include great-horned owls and coyotes, though humans and domestic animals play a large part in skunk predation. Skunks have a good sense of smell and good sense of hearing, but not the best eyesight. A lot of times when they get hit by a car, they can't see what's going on, so they just stop. And by that time it's too late.

They can climb, but they do not climb very readily as they are not very agile. One of the dangers to them is people putting out pellets to kill snails and slugs or spray pesticides in their gardens.

"We want them to keep their natural behaviors and fear of humans and domestic animals," adds Christine Barton, director of operations at FFAWC.

Homeowners may contact FFAWC for advice or with any questions or concerns — call 760-789-2324 or email [wildliferehab@fundforanimals.org](mailto:wildliferehab@fundforanimals.org).

### Skunk Odor-Removing Recipe

In a plastic bucket, mix the following ingredients:

- 1 quart of 3% hydrogen peroxide
- ¼ cup of baking soda
- 1-2 teaspoons of liquid soap

Wear gloves to mix well, and apply thoroughly to the affected areas. May be used on dogs, but avoid contact with the face and eyes. Rinse well. Contact a veterinarian if the spray has affected the dog's eyes. Do not mix or store in a sealed bottle, as it may explode. For contaminated clothing or bedding, use vinegar in the washing machine to remove odor. Or a half-cup of baking soda mixed with laundry detergent may be used. Ramona

*Home Journal/Julian Journal is not responsible for any damages or injuries caused by the use of this recipe. Contact a doctor or veterinarian with questions or concerns.*

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