

# Striped Skunk

*Mephitis mephitis*



## Other common names

None

## Introduction

Striped skunks are highly recognizable for their distinctive coloring and their ability to spray an extremely foul smelling substance when they feel threatened. Some folks may also recognize them as the inspiration for the Looney Tunes character Pepé le Pew.

There are 11 different species in the skunk family, with 5 species residing throughout the United States, but only the striped skunk can be found in New York.



Pepé le Pew

## Physical Description and Anatomy

Striped skunks are about the size of an average domestic cat. Adults can weigh anywhere between 2 – 12 lbs (0.9 – 5.4 kg), and are 18 – 32 inches (45.7 – 81.3 cm) long, with the tail making up 7 – 11 inches (17.8 – 27.9 cm) of that length. They have a stout body, short legs, and a long, bushy tail. Each foot is equipped with five strong claws that are used for digging.

The bold striping pattern of the glossy black and white fur is highly variable. This coloration is designed to serve as a warning to other species not to bother it, or they will suffer the consequences. Generally, the top of the head is white, which splits into two stripes of white down the back, divided by a stripe of black. The lower parts are black as well. Variations may

result in individuals that are all white above and all black below, some other combination of stripes and patches, or almost solid white or black.



Picture showing variation in color patterns of striped skunk.

Skunks have such bold coloration because they have a built in defense mechanism that makes

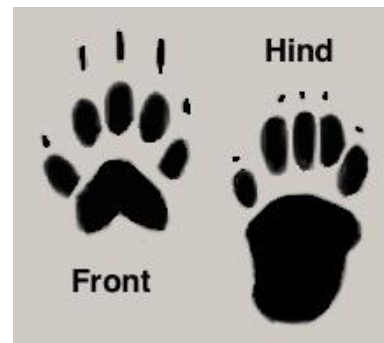
threats want to stay far far away. Skunks produce a foul smelling musk from anal glands that is used to deter predators from bothering them. They are able to spray this liquid up to 20 feet (6 m), and have a high degree of accuracy. The spray can cause nausea, vomiting, and irritation if it gets in the eyes. They store enough for about 5 sprays, but if they are fully depleted it takes over a week to replenish their reserves.

### Identifying features (tracks, scat, calls)

Skunk coloration is highly distinctive, so it's unlikely you'll confuse them for any other species in New York. They're generally nocturnal, so you won't see them out and about during the day very often. You're also more likely to smell them than see them. Their scent is easily discernable even if they haven't sprayed their musk recently. However, skunk musk smells very similar to that of red fox, so look for other signs as well. Look for impressions of their long claws in tracks, as well as signs they've been digging for grubs and insects. They may develop a latrine site outside of dens that have been in use for an extended period.



Striped skunk latrine site outside den.



Striped skunk tracks.

Front:  $\frac{7}{8}$  –  $1 \frac{1}{2}$  inches long by  $\frac{3}{4}$  –  $1 \frac{3}{16}$  inches wide.

Hind:  $\frac{15}{16}$  –  $1 \frac{13}{16}$  inches long by  $\frac{13}{16}$  –  $1 \frac{1}{4}$  inches wide.



Assorted striped skunk scat.



Top: Sign of a skunk digging up grubs from an infested lawn.

Bottom: Grubs removed from an area where skunks were digging up the lawn.

## Habitat

Striped skunks can be found in a variety of habitats, including open woodlands, forests, and grassy plains. They prefer open areas, and move to new habitat as abandoned fields and pastures become forests. Practices like lawn mowing and pruning that maintain an open canopy encourage skunks to remain in the area. For example, residential areas with lawns and shade trees that produce mast are a favored habitat of skunks. They can also be found in urban areas, and in recent years have even been seen in Central Park in New York City.

## Behavior and Diet

Skunks are omnivorous and nocturnal, foraging during the night or at dawn for berries, grasses, nuts, and other vegetative materials. They have poor eyesight, and locate their food by smell. Their diet is seasonal, and insects and grubs make up a large portion of their intake when they are available. Skunks will also feed on nestling birds, eggs, small rodents, young mammals in burrows, crayfish, and frogs. They leave holes and mounds of dirt as signs of their feeding activities when digging up insects and ground nests. In urban areas they will feed on garbage left out by humans.

Skunks den in wood and rock piles, ground burrows, and beneath buildings. In winter, they hole up in their den and remain inactive for long periods, but they don't hibernate. If skunks feel threatened, they will raise their fur and tail as a warning, making themselves appear larger. The next step is to stomp their feet and hiss. Spraying their musk is a last resort as it takes a lot of effort to produce, and they would rather escape threats without spraying if possible. Domestic

dogs are frequent victims of skunk spraying, mostly because they are curious and sometimes intrusive, ignoring the warning signs. Cats, on the other hand, often get along well with skunks, and farmers report seeing skunks and cats feeding from the same dishes on a regular basis. When competing for mates or defending territory, skunks do not spray other skunks, and instead fight with teeth and claws.

## Human Interactions

The most common conflict between humans and skunks is complaints of the strong smell. This is generally considered a mild nuisance, unless you happen to own a dog who regularly gets sprayed by skunks. Check the Links section below for steps to deodorize your skunked dog.

Skunks are also considered an agricultural pest, as they will occasionally raid chicken coops. In early fall, keep an eye out for skunks looking to hole up in wood piles and under porches for the winter. Finally, pelts are an important part of the fur industry, and trapping of skunks is allowed in many areas.

## Reproduction

Striped skunks mate in February and early March. Gestation lasts about 63 days, but females have the ability to delay implantation, and they usually give birth in May. Litters of about 6 young are born in dens which are often repurposed woodchuck burrows. They are blind and mostly hairless at birth. They open their eyes at 3 – 4 weeks, and at this point they learn how to control the direction of their spray. Young are weaned around 6 – 7 weeks, when they start to follow the mother on her foraging trips. Look out for an adult female followed by a train of her young, as she will be more sensitive to threats. They stay together as a family unit until August or September when the young disperse. Young are sexually mature and begin breeding the following spring. In captivity, skunks can live up to 10 years, but in the wild they generally don't live past 6 years. Their defensive spray discourages most predators, but they are still taken by coyotes, foxes, bobcats, and fisher. Owls routinely take skunks, and don't mind the odor as they don't have a sense of smell.

## Fun Facts

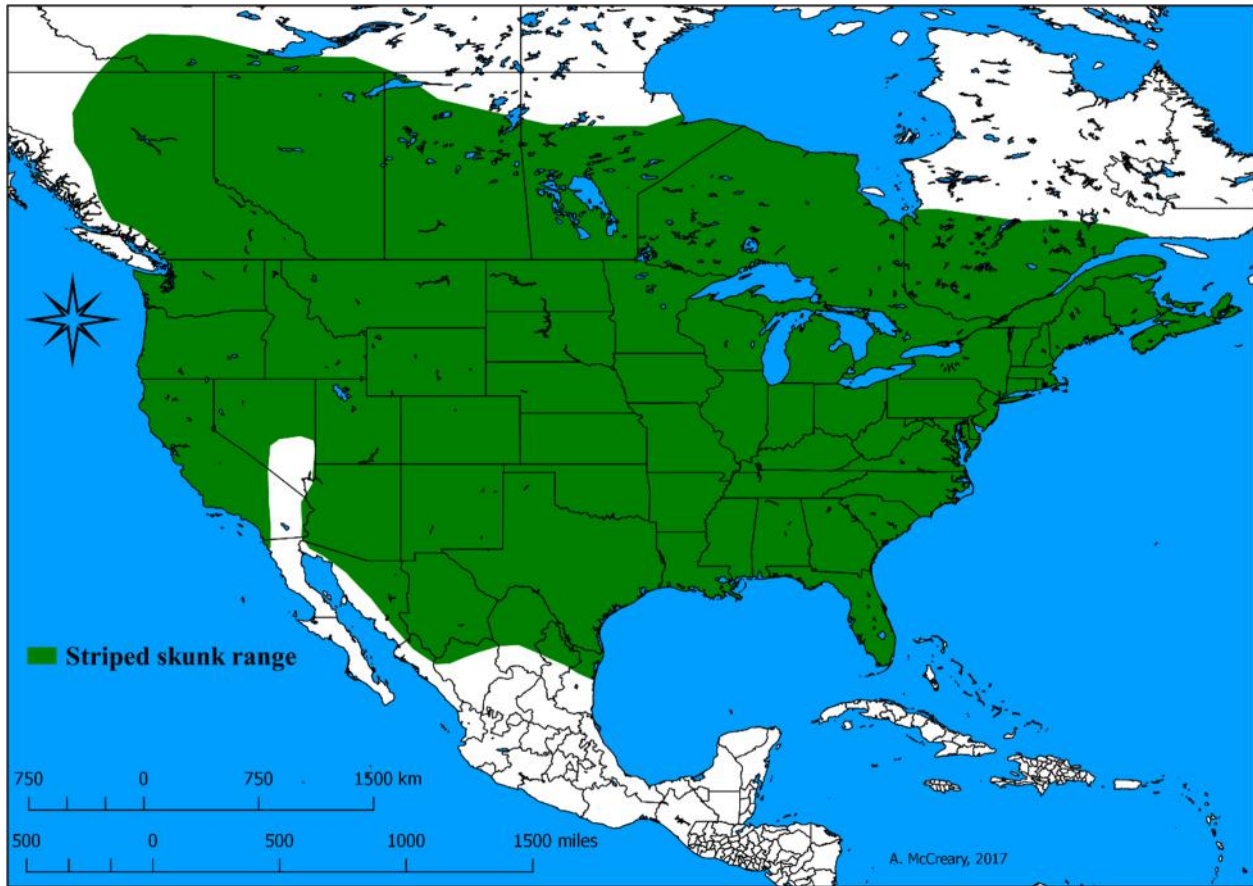
The skunk's scientific name, *Mephitis mephitis*, translates to double foul odor.

They can spray their foul smelling fluid up to 20 feet (6 m).

A group of skunks is called a "surfeit".

## Range and Status

Striped skunks are found from southern Canada, throughout most of the United States, into northern Mexico. Populations in New York and across the majority of its range are stable. Threats include outbreaks of rabies as well as overharvesting for the fur trade.



## Management and Research in New York

In New York, trapping of striped skunks is allowed and they are managed as a small furbearer.

### At Dyken Pond

Skunks are not a common sight around Dyken Pond. If you are hiking the trails and smell what you think is skunk musk, it is more likely to be musk from a red fox, which smell very similar.

## Links

More information can be found at the following links:

Humane Society's advice on how to de-skunk your dog (or yourself)

[http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/dogs/tips/de-skunking\\_dog.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/](http://www.humanesociety.org/animals/dogs/tips/de-skunking_dog.html?referrer=https://www.google.com/)

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