

# Little skunks make big impressions

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by Helen Fancher

As we looked out of a corner window of our home one moonlit night, we observed a harrowing sight. Two very special animals were approaching that corner from different directions, each unaware of the other. One was a little kit fox and the other was the beautiful and unusual hooded skunk.

We held our breath as the two met. The white tail was instantly raised in warning, but then each animal ambled slowly off in search of his own food.

The hooded skunk (*Mephitis macroura*) has long, luxuriant fur which is almost entirely white except for the tiny black feet and some black on the face. It is native to most Central America and into Arizona.

Our second Arizona adventure with a skunk occurred when we rose one morning to discover a little spotted skunk (*Spilogale putorius*) curled up and asleep in our Hav-a-Hart trap. We called our various animal-loving friends, but very little advice was forthcoming — and certainly no offers of help in releasing the little fellow.

Finally, my husband dressed in his most disposable outfit and prepared a large shield of corrugated cardboard with a hole in the middle where his arm could reach through to release the catch on the trap. Then he slowly advanced, speaking in a calm and gentle tone, until he could open the trap. Our little friend then picked himself up and wandered up the hill as though nothing had happened.

We discovered that it was a rare privilege to have seen the spotted skunk at all. It never comes out of hiding until after dark, and it is more secretive than

its striped cousin. It also is smaller and faster, and is the only skunk able to climb trees.

Like the striped skunk, it is all black and white. On the spotted skunk, a number of white stripes move in waverling lines along the body, and there is always a white dot in the middle of the forehead. These little animals are particularly fond of snakes as food, and have been known to kill rattlesnakes.



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The striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) is the most common variety recognized by most humans and wild animals. It lives in all 48 contiguous states. It is a handsome animal, about 12- to 16-inches from nose to rump. A white stripe runs from the nose across the top of the head, where it splits into two parts — one running down each side of the body. The tail usually curls over the back like a black and white banner.

All skunks have two glands embedded in muscle, one on each side of the anus. Normally the glands are carried inside the body, but when the animal is angry or in danger, the glands protrude, much like the nozzles of tiny water hoses. The tail is raised out of the way, and finally the skunk contracts the muscles around the glands, firing jets of oily, yellowish liquid. It is thought that the first jet can be fired 5 feet to 8 feet. The little

spotted skunk stands on his front feet, with his body erect, to fire. Luckily the skunk is a peace-loving animal, and never uses its awesome weapon except in self-defense. Tiny amounts of skunk musk are used in making the most expensive perfumes.

Most animals soon learn to leave the skunk alone. In the wild its one real enemy is the great horned owl. The owl may carry the skunk's odor for weeks.

If you are out at night and get a sudden whiff of that familiar odor, and it disappears quickly, the chances are it was not a skunk but a great horned owl that fed on a skunk.

The automobile is the skunk's most deadly enemy. Frequently the animals prowl the highways at night, feeding on other creatures killed by passing cars. When the skunk sees the approaching headlights, it expects the auto to give him the right away just as another animal would. The result can be disaster for both skunk and car.

After mating, the male wanders away. If he should meet the female and his own young later in the summer, he apparently does not recognize them. Some two months after mating, the mother will give birth to a litter of four to six tiny, blind, hairless kittens, each weighing about half an ounce.

three weeks old, they open their eyes for the first time. It is probably about now that they begin to develop the musk glands that will be their protection throughout life.

At six weeks they are strong enough to follow their mother when she goes hunting. Instead of galloping off in every direction as most animals do, the mother leads the way and the young follow in single file.

It is a strange sight for those fortunate enough to see it. Skunks are very maternal, and have been known to adopt orphan young, raising them as their own. By late summer the young begin to wander off, and by fall the mother is usually once more alone.

Insects make up over half of their diet. Ernest Thompson Seton, the famous naturalist, once wrote that every skunk was the "guardian angel" of a half-acre of garden because of the insects it destroyed.



A family of skunks was spotted through the evening outing.