

STRIPED SKUNK



The **striped skunk**, (*Mephitis mephitis*) is cat-sized, short-legged and stocky. It has a tapered muzzle, small eyes and small ears. It is mostly black, with a narrow white stripe from nose to forehead, and white cap on the top of the head that extends as two broad stripes down either side of the body to the plume-like tail, which is slightly shorter than the length of the body and contains variable amounts of white and black hairs. It is shy, slow-moving, has limited climbing ability, and poor eyesight. The natural diet of skunks consists mostly of insects such as grasshoppers, crickets, beetle larvae and moths, but also includes small mammals, birds, birds' eggs, frogs, snakes, slugs and snails, and carrion. Some fruits are also eaten. In urban areas, skunks will eat garden fruits, grain crops such as corn, and human food scraps.

Skunks are active from dusk to dawn, and spend the day time in dens, which may be natural cavities such as abandoned burrows of other animals, or, in urban habitats, in spaces beneath sheds and porches. They are most active in warm months and remain within dens during winter months. Young are born in late winter or early spring. Litter size is usually 4 to 6.

Skunks are best known for their defensive action, which is to raise their tail and from scent glands near the anus spray a foul-smelling, caustic fluid at enemies.

History and Habitat in Richmond

The striped skunk is widespread in North America. In British Columbia it is most common in the Lower Fraser Valley, but is rarely seen due to its shy nature and crepuscular (dawn or dusk) or nocturnal habits. Skunks have probably lived in Richmond as long as the city has existed, and in general lead easy lives in suburban habitats. Skunks are omnivorous, but the bulk of their diet is insects, which are plentiful among the variety of plants, landscapes, water features and microclimates found in back yard gardens. In addition, suburbs offer fruit and vegetable gardens, weak-walled compost bins and poorly-sealed garbage containers that may also provide sources of food. Garden sheds, or crawl spaces under porches provide sleeping or denning sites and places to raise young. In the absence of natural predators such as bobcats and foxes, the survival rate of young is high. It would be higher, but poor eyesight and slow movements prevent skunks, especially young of the year, from avoiding cars, resulting in frequent roadkill in urban areas.

Conflict with People

Lawns

In Richmond it has become common to wake up and discover that large patches of your lawn have been dug up. Raccoons may be partly to blame, but the most penetrating damage is likely the handiwork of a skunk, an animal with stout front legs and sturdy claws adapted to digging.

The skunk was most likely searching for the larvae and pupae of an introduced, invasive insect, the European Chafer Beetle. Since 2001 the beetle has been spreading throughout Greater Vancouver, and in about 2012 invaded Richmond. Chafer beetles, which are stout brown beetles about the size of a kidney bean, lay eggs in the soil of lawns in mid-summer. The larvae grow underground, feeding on the roots of grass, eventually transforming into pupae that then turn into beetles that emerge from the soil the following summer. The larvae and pupae are rich in fats and proteins, and are irresistible to skunks.

The only certain way to prevent skunks from digging up a lawn in their search for European chafer beetles is to get rid of the beetles, which is not easy. There is no single simple solution once the beetles are established, but one partial remedy is to apply nematodes, which are microscopic roundworms, available at garden supply stores, to the lawn in the third week of July, when the larvae of the beetles are hatching. The nematodes will kill the beetle larvae if the lawn is kept moist for at least two weeks, which may require an exemption from lawn-watering restrictions. Further information on chafer beetle control is provided on the [City of Richmond Invasive Species Page](http://www.richmond.ca/wildlife).



Gardens

If the undesired presence of skunks on a property is not related to the chafer beetle, whatever else is attracting them should be removed or skunk-proofed. Ready food sources such as overflowing bird feeders, fallen fruit, and pet food should not be left on the ground. Compost should be well-maintained, free of meat, within a strong container. Rubbish heaps and derelict wood piles, which may serve as sleeping dens, should be tidied up or removed. In addition, fences should be well-maintained with no gaps beneath, set into the ground if possible.

Dens

To dissuade skunks from using space beneath sheds, crawl spaces, and raised porches as den sites and nurseries, gaps below buildings should be filled or covered, and vents and other possible entry spots should be checked and strengthened. In addition, a female skunk searching a place to give birth can be deterred by placing a closed, perforated container containing ammonia- or vinegar-soaked rags inside the potential nesting site.

If a female with a litter is found, it may be best to let her raise the babies to the point where they leave the den with her (6-7 weeks), and once sure the den is empty, seal the entrance to prevent a repeated denning in subsequent years. Skunks breed once a year in late winter or early spring. The young leave the den in May. If a skunk is to be removed, the BCSPCA recommends contacting a BCSPCA-accredited [Animal Kind Animal Control Operator](#), to ensure the use of humane methods.

Spraying

Being sprayed by a skunk is thoroughly unpleasant, even second-hand through the spraying of the family dog, which is the usual victim. Fortunately, skunks do not spray easily. They are usually slow to rile, and spray as a last resort. Unless attacked suddenly, a skunk will provide warning by running forward a few steps, stopping, raising its tail, or turning around, tail raised, foreshadowing what is to come if the threat doesn't back off. It will snort and stomp its feet, but if still feeling threatened will spray a butyl mercaptan compound from anal glands up to 5 metres. Being struck in the face can result in temporary blindness and cause vomiting. The smell is penetrating and incapacitating. It is also persistent, and difficult to remove from fabric and pet fur. To prevent dogs from being sprayed, do not let them outside alone after dark, and when out walking at night, keep dogs leashed and within sight.

Traditional but ineffective remedies for removing skunk spray from clothes, dogs, or people include saturation with tomato or citrus juices or masking with perfume or other odour-masking product. Pet supply stores and some veterinary clinics sell commercial products that are to some degree effective. In addition, the following solution, widely reported to work, can be made from easily-obtained ingredients:

- 1 litre (4 cups) 3% hydrogen peroxide
- 125 ml (½ cup) baking soda
- 5 ml (1 tsp) liquid dish detergent
- scrub, rinse and repeat
- The solution must be used as soon as it is made. It is unstable and won't keep.



Rabies

In some parts of the Striped Skunk's range, notably in eastern Canada, rabies outbreaks are common and contact with skunks can be dangerous to other mammals, including humans and their pets. Currently rabies is not known in skunks in British Columbia. Nevertheless if bitten or scratched by a skunk it is best to seek medical advice.



Additional Information

For more information on how to deal with conflicts with skunks, see the [Best Practices for dealing with skunks](#) from the BCSPCA or call them at 604-277-3100.

