

COLUMNISTS

There's more to skunks than meets the nose

Jared Rhoton Special to the Reporter-News

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When skunks come up in conversation, most people's minds go back to their childhood and they picture Flowers the Skunk from the movie "Bambi." Their second thought probably has to do with the rather odiferous qualities that skunks exhibit during their lives.

Skunks are one of the more instantly recognizable species in Texas, but surprisingly people do not really know more about them than their appearance and smell-crafting abilities.

The striped skunk is the most common in our area, but there are actually five species of skunks in Texas: striped skunk, hooded skunk, hog-nosed skunk, eastern spotted skunk and western spotted skunk. They are all black and white but have very different behaviors, habitats, color patterns and sizes.

The striped skunk is black and has a white stripe that starts on its head and then divides to go down both sides of its back and tail. Striped skunks have a very wide range extending over much of North America.

It takes a truly versatile animal to live from the arid deserts of Mexico all the way to the frozen tundra of Canada. They live in brushy, rocky areas and often under rocks or in burrows of other animals. They have adapted to live under old buildings, houses or barns – unfortunately for other inhabitants!

If you have seen a striped skunk, it was probably out foraging for food at night near its den. They are extremely opportunistic omnivores that will eat a wide range of foodstuffs.

Generally, they are insectivores in the spring and summer when grasshoppers, beetles and crickets are abundant. In the fall, they switch to a carnivorous diet of baby birds, eggs, mice, small rabbits or reptiles as the insect populations die off.

They do eat the parts of some plants, such as corn, berries or roots, but this makes up a marginal portion of their diet.

You will not usually see skunks together unless it is mating season or a mother is out with her brood of kits. When it is skunk mating season, the number of skunks that are road killed will skyrocket.

Striped skunk mating season is usually in early spring. After a gestation period of 62 to 75 days, the mother will have a litter of three to nine babies. These kits will be blind and deaf for the first 30 days of their lives.

The babies are weaned after eight to 10 weeks and will then begin leaving the den, following their mother as she forages for food. After learning the ropes of life, each skunk goes its own way later in the summer.

While you might think that such a little animal would be easy prey in the wild, this is not the case. When threatened, a skunk will make noises, stomp its feet or wave its tail. But the final protection is spraying musk from glands under their tails quite accurately as far as 15 feet.

Due to their strong odiferous defense mechanism, there are few animals that want to make them a snack. Owls are the main exception to this rule because they don't have a sense of smell.

The lifespan of a skunk in the wild is seldom more than two years, but a skunk kept in captivity may live more than 10 years.

Skunks are one type of wild mammal that may carry rabies in their saliva. If you see a skunk behaving abnormally, contact animal control or a local wildlife agency. Keep pets away from it and do not approach it.

If you have ever spent time around your older relatives, you might have heard the saying, "so and so is a no-good polecat." A polecat is a slang term for a skunk, so obviously that person is not in particularly good odor with said relative.

Sorry, but I had to get a skunk joke in somewhere!

Jared Rhoton, is a member of the Big Country Chapter of Texas Master Naturalists. When he's not making up skunk jokes, he's volunteering in the Big Country, teaching, learning and enjoying the Texas outdoors. Join him and others — check us out on Facebook at @BCTXMN or on our state website at txmn.tamu.edu.