

Skunks – by Sally Cureton

It always seems like there are more skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*) dead by the side of the road in March than at any other time. Turns out that is when they are mating - from mid-February thru mid-April. About two months later, the female skunk will bear four to eight young. Dad does not stick around and does not help raise the young. Skunk kits are born hairless weighing less than an ounce. After nursing for six to eight weeks, they will emerge from the den with their mother on nightly forays looking for food. They don't go far. Even adult skunks on their own will stay within about one-half mile of their dens.

Skunks are quite omnivorous. In the summer they feed heavily on insects. With the sharp claws on their forepaws they will dig out bumblee and yellow jacket colonies. They will also eat ants, grasshoppers, crickets, moths and beetles. In addition they consume eggs, small amphibians, berries, fruit, garbage and carrion. Skunks do eat a lot during the summer months to build up a layer of fat to sustain them over the winter. Although they do not hibernate, they go dormant underground during cold weather. A skunk's body temperature will drop from 98 degrees to 88 degrees and they will lose from one-quarter to one-half of their weight from November to March.

With a small head, small ears and short legs, these animals generally weight about 8-10 pounds and are about two feet long including a 10 inch tail. The white strip down the center of the head splits into two strips going down the back and then becomes one again on the tail. If you've ever seen one in the woods or by the side of the road here, you know they move very slowly. Well known for its spray, this is generally a very mild-mannered animal that will spray only as a last resort. It gives plenty of warning before letting loose. When they do spray, they have an amazing range and accuracy - up to 12-15 feet in any direction. Because of this ability, they have few natural enemies. The most notable one being the great horned owl - which has no sense of smell. Skunk spray contains sulphur compounds that not only smell dreadful. They will irritate the eyes and sinuses. The skunk family name, *Mephitidae*, is based on the Latin word for noxious stench.

A member of the weasel family, skunks are related to river otter, fisher and mink and are found throughout the United States. They can swim, but don't generally like to do so and do not climb trees. It is believed that they live for an average of two to four years in the wild. If kept in captivity, they can live for up to ten years. Nocturnal, they have poor sight, smell and hearing ability. If one is seen moving around in the daytime, it is possible that it is sick with rabies.