



## Skunks

Skunks are probably best known for their ability to spray an offensive odor on their enemies. But there is much more to skunks than meets the eye (or in this case, the nose).

Skunks belong to the weasel, or Mustelidae, family. Some of the skunk's closest relatives are weasels, badgers, otters, and ferrets. The four main types of skunks living in North America are the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*), spotted skunk (*Spilogale gracilis*), hog-nosed skunk (*Conepatus mesoleucus*), and hooded skunk (*Mephitis macroura*). All four species can be found in the Sonoran Desert area.

Probably the most familiar of these is the striped skunk, as it is known for its black coat with white stripes. However, some may not have any stripes. The spotted skunk is the smallest of the four and appears to have spots or broken stripes down its back. The hooded skunk looks almost like the striped, but it has long white fur that spreads out around its neck. The least common of the four, the hog-nosed skunk, is mostly all white on top and black beneath, and has a hog like nose used for examining the dirt. Most skunks have long tails, sometimes longer than their bodies.

Skunks are carnivores. They typically hunt at night, utilizing their great sense of smell to search for such prey as beetles, crickets, and grasshoppers. Meals might also include bird eggs, frogs, mice, worms, lizards, and clams, as well as leaves, fruit, nuts, and grass.

Skunks are nocturnal animals and plantigrades, which means that they do not walk on their toes, but rather with their feet flat on the ground. This is what makes them look like they are waddling or shuffling around. As you might guess, this does not allow for the skunk to be a very fast runner. This is where its ability to spray comes in as an important means of defense.

Skunks warn their enemies, such as coyotes and owls, when they are about to spray by stomping their feet. The spotted skunk even goes so far as to do a handstand before spraying! Ironically, skunks seem to dislike their own skunk oil as they are hesitant to spray when they cannot get their tails out of the way. The smelly, white or yellowish oil is "fired" through either one or two nipples near the skunk's rear end and can either come out as a light spray or a stream of drops. Skunks can spray targets up to 16 feet away!

Skunks are fairly adaptable animals and can be found in high elevation dens as well as low elevation dens. They can be found in mountainous terrain, deserts, and forests. Tall grass and ditches provide good cover. Skunks tend to live in dens above ground during warmer months and underground burrows during colder months. Interestingly, skunks do not mind having roommates. They may share their burrows with not only other skunks but also raccoons and rabbits.