

SKUNKS are some of the most easily recognized small omnivores (eats both plants and animals) in North America. Members of the weasel family, skunks are also called polecats or satchet kittens. These four-legged fumigators have adapted well to urban and suburban life.

Two species of skunks are found in the Bay Area: the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) and the less commonly seen Western spotted skunk (*Spilogale gracilis*). The striped skunk is cat-sized (18 inches long) with a bushy black tail, a thin white stripe down the center of the face, and two broad white stripes running along the back that meet in a cap on the shoulders and head. The spotted skunk is smaller (12 inches long) and, as its name implies, it is covered with white spots.

The striped skunk's scientific name (*mephitis*) means "a noxious exhalation from the ground." So (*Mephitis mephitis*) must mean a double dose.



Mother and young.



If you see this, you could be sprayed.

Joe DiDonato



IN THE WILD

A skunk's diet consists mostly of rodents and insects, but it is a predator of opportunity so it will also eat amphibians, snakes, lizards, eggs from ground nesting birds, carrion, berries, fruit, and pet food. It is quite fond of yellowjackets and their nests.

Because of their uniquely effective defensive system, skunks have few natural enemies. Great horned owls and golden eagles, better known for their eyesight than sense of smell, will hunt and eat skunks. The gray fox has learned to climb trees and quickly drop down

on unsuspecting skunks before they can spray. Perhaps their most deadly predator is the automobile, since skunks confronted by approaching cars will often stand their ground to the very end.



IN YOUR YARD

Skunks have adapted well to human activity. They are usually nocturnal (active at night) but may be seen out looking for food during daylight hours, especially late afternoon. They are timid creatures if left alone.

A skunk's black and white coloring is a subtle warning to stay away. At night this coloring helps the skunk get noticed. Skunks will usually give out warning signs before using their defense as a last resort. Startled skunks may turn their back and wave their tail, or as in the case of the spotted skunk, do a handstand with hind feet and tail up in the air above their heads. They'll also arch their back, hiss, growl, and stomp their feet. If this doesn't work, a skunk will spray.

Two anal glands at the base of their tail hold enough of a yellow, fetid musk for five or six sprays. Said to have "awful accuracy," skunks can spray up to fifteen feet, with the odor traveling up to one-half mile. Skunks can spray several times in quick succession. The smell is nearly indescribable and the spray can cause extreme pain and temporary blindness if it enters one's eyes.



IF THEY ARE IN OR UNDER YOUR HOUSE

In neighborhoods, skunks will often den under houses or sheds. The den entrance



maybe marked with snagged hairs and a faint "skunk" odor. Skunks use their den all year so they keep it clean, often throwing litter and debris out the entrance.

Your best bet for preventing skunks from building a den under your house is to exclude them in the first place. Make sure the wire screens on vents are secure, and seal all holes in foundations and under porches. Mothballs (naphthalene or camphor) or shallow pans of ammonia may discourage skunks. Bright lights placed under a building may also prevent skunks from hanging around.

The best way to get a skunk out of its den is to wait for it to leave on its own. Sprinkle



Darrol Stillenburg

Taking advantage of dog food.

smooth sand or flour around the entrance and watch for tracks to indicate the skunk has left. Once the skunk is gone, seal the den entrance with ¼-inch hardware cloth. Be sure to sink it several inches into the ground to prevent the skunk from digging under the wire. Young skunks remain in the den from April through August. Make sure that all animals are out before sealing up the den.

Also, remove easy food sources from your yard such as bowls of dog or cat food. This is just an invitation to a hungry skunk.



Sniffing for grubs.

Joe DiDonato



CAUTION

Skunks are the primary carriers of rabies in California. Contrary to popular belief, it is impossible to contract rabies from a skunk's spray. Rabid skunks exhibit aggressive or agitated behavior and should be avoided. Never touch a dead skunk. If you see one that appears to be ill, contact your local animal control department for assistance.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

If you or your pet are sprayed by a skunk, there are a number of products available in pet stores that will cut or reduce the odor. Tomato juice will not remove the smell. It can bring you only temporarily relief since the strong skunk musk will soon return.

Try washing sprayed clothes in ammonia or diluted chlorine bleach. Washing may not completely remove the smell, since it can return when the clothes get wet. Although skunk smell can linger for several weeks, vinegar can sometimes reduce the smell.

Text by Ira Bletz
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Visitor Centers & Recreation Services

ARDENWOOD HISTORIC FARM
Fremont 510-796-0199, awvisit@ebparks.org

BLACK DIAMOND MINES
Antioch 925-757-2620, bdvisit@ebparks.org

COYOTE HILLS REGIONAL PARK
Fremont 510-795-9385, chvisit@ebparks.org

CRAB COVE at CROWN BEACH
Alameda 510-521-6887, ccove@ebparks.org

SUNOL REGIONAL WILDERNESS
Sunol 925-862-2601, svisit@ebparks.org

TILDEN NATURE AREA/EEC and LITTLE FARM
Berkeley 510-525-2233, tnarea@ebparks.org

AQUATICS UNIT
510-690-6620, dmccormick@ebparks.org

REGIONAL PARKS BOTANIC GARDEN
c/o Tilden Regional Park, Berkeley
510-841-8732
bgarden@ebparks.org, www.nativeplants.org

OUTDOOR RECREATION UNIT
District-wide programs 510-544-2512
recreation@ebparks.org

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Skunks

