



Striped Skunk—Pet or Threat

by
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*There was a young man from the city,
Who saw what he thought was a kitty.*

Saying, "nice little cat",

He gave it a pat . . .

They buried his clothes out of pity.¹

Introduction

Among the various species the veterinarian may be called upon to render his services to is the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*). These small (3½–10 lbs.), short-eared, long-tailed carnivores are best known for their characteristic black and white striped color and unpleasant odor. To the practicing veterinarian they must

be viewed not only as pets but as potential public health threats.

Geographic distribution of the striped skunk is throughout the United States, southern Canada and northern Mexico, with the highest concentration in the central region of the United States. Although generally typified as having a white skull cap, a nose with a dorsal white line and two white lines of varying width and length along its black back, there is some color variation. Some for example show only a white tuft on their back and there are even isolated reports of albino individuals. This color variation could cause some confusion in distinguishing it from the less frequently seen spotted skunk or civet cat (*Spilogale putorius*) that occupies

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generally the same territory to a lesser degree. The spotted skunk is smaller ($\frac{3}{4}$ – $2\frac{3}{4}$ lbs.) and has the characteristic markings of white stripes and spots on a black background.

In the wild state, the nocturnal striped skunk is classified as a carnivore, but its diet actually is comprised mainly of insects. Therefore, in this regard it is an asset to an agricultural community, rather than a detriment. Skunks have few enemies in the wild due to their well-known specialized defense mechanism. Because they are confident in this odoriferous deterrent skunks are quiet, inoffensive creatures—it is this gentle nature that has made them popular as pets.

Skunks As Pets

Source of the new pet is of primary importance. It is imperative to know if the skunk came from the wild, from offspring of a friend's pet female or from a pet store. Regulations vary from state to state pertaining to the keeping of wild animals, so one should contact a local conservation agent or state conservation commission to determine the status of issuing permits to the species in question. Some veterinarians refuse to treat any wild animal that does not have a permit.

Skunks are a major reservoir of rabies in the wild state and must always be looked upon as a rabies suspect no matter what their age or health status. The incubation period in skunks is long (2 weeks to possibly 4 months) and often rabies is carried as an inapparent infection. Due to the possibility of transmission of the virus via the milk to the young, even the neonate wild skunk must be viewed with suspicion. Conversely, it is felt that the per cent infected of the entire skunk population is relatively low. But does the client wish to take the chance? The veterinarian must inform the client of the danger involved.

Although there are accounts of skunks making companionable pets, this is not always the case. Taming of skunks requires more patience than would be required for a normal cat or dog. Success

is higher if the animal is obtained at an early age and is tamed over an extended period of time. House breaking is conducted much like it is in the dog—some have used litter boxes with success.

If one is determined to keep a skunk as a pet, de-scenting is advised. Prior to performing the procedure, it is the veterinarian's responsibility to advise the owner that a de-scented skunk is a skunk that has lost its primary means of defense; such an animal cannot be returned to the wild. Likewise, such an animal must be protected from domestic dogs. This procedure is best done at an age of five or six weeks utilizing a short-acting anesthetic such as Ketamine administered intramuscularly at a dosage rate of 5 mg/kg to 20 mg/kg. The scent glands are located at the base of the tail on both sides of the anus. The glands are about $\frac{1}{2}$ " in diameter and are connected by ducts to tiny, paired nipples just within the anus. Several surgical procedures have been described, one of which consists of grasping the duct with a forceps at its opening just inside the anal orifice. By blunt dissection the entire gland is removed through this opening.

A suitable diet in captivity consists mainly of ground meat, dog meal, assorted fruits and eggs. Mineral supplementation such as calcium bone meal plus trace minerals is highly advised. Commercially available vitamin formulations should also supplement the diet.

In captivity the skunk should be provided with a nesting box for sleeping and withdrawal purposes. Other aspects of home care are also considered important as they are in domestic pets. Ectoparasites do not tend to be a problem, but if discovered they can be treated in a similar manner to dogs and cats. Shedding of hair is not noticeable, still it is wise to brush the animal's coat periodically for cosmetic reasons.

Examination and treatment in the striped skunk is similar to the domestic dog and cat. An important aspect in medical care is immunization. Four months is the optimal age for rabies vaccination. The killed tissue rabies virus must be used and

should be repeated annually. Starting at eight to ten weeks of age killed tissue canine distemper vaccine should be administered as it is in dogs. A complete immunization program also includes feline panleukopenia and leptospirosis vaccinations.

Other medical and surgical problems correspond quite closely to the domestic pet species. No unusual drug sensitivity has been reported in the skunk and dosages are similar to that recommended for dogs on a weight basis.

Under the proper circumstances the striped skunk can be expected to be an amiable pet with a life expectancy of seven to eight years. The veterinary profession should not condone this animal as a pet and should warn the owners of the hazards involved. However, if the animal is kept as a pet it is the veterinarian's responsibility to inform the owner of the proper care and treatment of the animal.

Skunks as Pets by Charles Hume (All Pets Book Inc., P. O. Box 151, Fond du lac, Wisconsin, 75¢) or other comparable reading should be recommended to the client as an additional source of information.

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What's Your Radiographic Diagnosis?

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History

A two and a half year old Appaloosa gelding was presented to the Stange Memorial Clinic for examination and diagnosis of a severe supporting lameness of the left rear leg.

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The owner related that two and one half months previous to the date of admission the animal jumped a fence escaping into a neighbor's field. The animal returned later in the day dragging the affected leg. A small open lesion was noted on the posterior-lateral aspect of the hock. Considerable swelling of the hock occurred during the next 24 hours, but this receded and