



Managing SKUNK Damage

Skunks are considered by many people to be odorous and obnoxious pests that should be avoided at all costs and even eliminated on sight. However, these animals generally are beneficial because they help control grubs, insects and rodents. They range throughout the United States and are considered important furbearers in many states.

Skunks are primarily nocturnal, preferring to hunt at night for grubs, insects, small rodents, carrion, fruit, berries, unripened corn, mushrooms and other food items. Skunks like poultry and eggs and, when circumstances permit, raid chicken houses and poultry yards. In urban areas, they feed on pet food, garbage, fruit that

has fallen from trees, and garden vegetables. Skunks use any sheltered place as a den including abandoned armadillo burrows, predator dens, areas under houses, unused buildings, barns and even, on rare occasions, attics of buildings.

Disease Transmission

Skunks are a primary source of rabies in Texas. Human and domestic pet contact with skunks should be avoided. If it is necessary to handle a skunk, take all precautions to keep from being bitten, scratched or sprayed.

Damage

Skunks become a problem when their feeding and burrowing activities conflict with man's interests. In urban areas, skunks may damage gardens and lawns as well as expose humans and pets to several transmittable diseases, especially rabies. In rural areas, skunks can cause losses to poultry operations, expose livestock to disease, and occasionally cause damage to crops.

Skunks can be a nuisance because of their odor. All skunks have the ability to discharge a nauseating musk from their anal glands. They can discharge their musk several times with accuracy to about 10 feet. Pets often are sprayed when they confront skunks. When skunks take shelter under buildings, their odor can make them an intolerable nuisance.

Biology and Reproduction

Adult weight: Depending on species, 3½ to 10 pounds.

Total length: Approximately 20 to 30 inches.

Color: Black and white.

Gestation period: 7 to 10 weeks.

Litter size: Four to six kits.

Number of litters: Single litter, usually born in spring.

Life span: Average 3 years.

Control Method

Because skunks can cause damage and are an important vector of disease, it is often necessary to control individual members of a population when they are in conflict with man's health and economic interests. Any type of control should include both environmental and mechanical control measures.

Environmental Control

When skunks are living or rearing young under buildings, attempts to destroy them may result in the release of their noxious scent. Before attempting removal, sprinkle a liberal amount of flour or a similar substance in and around the entrance. After dark, check for tracks to determine which openings they used as exits and the number of skunks involved. When the animals have left, close all possible entrances with sheet metal or hardware cloth to avoid reentry.

Fencing usually keeps skunks out of the yard; however, they will sometimes dig under. To prevent burrowing beneath a fence, bury a 30-inch piece of hardware cloth so it extends 12 inches below the surface and 18 inches outward at that depth.

Remove unused pet food and water bowls at night and keep lids on trash cans to aid in discouraging skunks.

Mechanical Control

Shooting and trapping, including the use of live traps and leghold traps, are some methods that can be used in rural areas. In urban areas, live trapping with baited box or cage traps is the most desirable method. Cage traps are available from feed or hardware stores. Almost any type of food can be used as bait to catch skunks,

although there is less chance of catching a small dog or cat if fruits such as apples, pears or bananas are used. Skunks rarely release their scent in darkened areas such as completely enclosed live traps that have been carefully covered with burlap. Leave an opening to identify the occupant before the trap is removed. Always approach a trap slowly and quietly to prevent upsetting a trapped skunk.

Odor Control

A skunk's odor on pets, clothing, under buildings, etc., may be neutralized by the liberal use of a commercial deodorizer. Vinegar, tomato juice, or a weak solution of household ammonia can help remove the odor from clothing. Use lime to deodorize the soil. A few drops of oil of wintergreen on pieces of corrugated cardboard or cotton balls also helps mask the offensive odor.

Restrictions

Skunks are classified as furbearers in Texas; however, it is legal to trap them. Under state law, a person may trap a furbearing animal at any time if it is causing damage or creating a nuisance; however, the pelt can be sold only during the furbearer season and with the proper licenses. Other furbearers include beaver, otter, mink, ringtailed cat, badger, raccoon, nutria, weasel, opossum, muskrat, fox and civet cat.

Landowners wishing to live trap skunks and relocate them after they have been caught must notify representatives of the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department.

For additional information contact the nearest office of Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service—Wildlife Services.

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