



Striped Skunk in New Jersey

The Striped Skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) is the most common member of the family *Mephitidae*. The striped skunk is generally a shy, non-aggressive mammal found throughout New Jersey. The geographic range of striped skunks increased in North America after colonization by Europeans as habitat increased for skunks with the clearing of the forests. The striped skunk's distribution ranges throughout most of the United States and northern Mexico to southern Canada from British Columbia, Hudson Bay, and Nova Scotia.

Almost everyone knows what a skunk looks like, and nearly everyone has smelled the skunk's characteristic strong musky odor on the breeze on a spring or summer night. The skunk has one of the most widely known systems of defense in the animal world, but striped skunks usually do not discharge their foul-smelling musk unless seriously threatened. When faced with danger they arch the back and erect the tail and hair. The musk is emitted in two streams of fluid from scent glands located just inside the anus. Once discharged the streams will meet after travelling about a foot, finally spreading into a fine spray that will travel up to about 10 or 12 feet. A direct hit causes considerable discomfort to the eyes and nasal cavities and can cause nausea. The mist of aerosol spray floats in the air, and even if the skunk does not score a direct hit the target animal (or human) will carry a strong odor of the musk on their fur or clothing.

Striped skunks are easily recognized by their black and white striped markings but can be nearly all white or almost completely black. Usually, the markings are a white triangular shape on the top of the head that fork into two stripes that travel down the sides of the back and merge again near the base of the tail. A white stripe also runs along the base of the nose between the eyes and ends on the forehead. The length and width of the white stripes vary between individuals. The tail can be striped, too, but more often is composed of both black and white hairs intermixed. Striped skunks are about the size of a domestic cat, with a small head, small ears, short legs, and a long, fluffy tail. The feet of the striped skunk are plantigrade with five partially webbed toes and claws longer on the front feet to aid in digging.

Adult striped skunks are usually from about 20 to 30 inches in total length (which includes the tail) and weigh between 4 and 10 pounds. Male skunks are usually about 10% larger than females. Striped skunks are not climbers (unlike most mustelids) and do all their foraging on the ground. Striped skunks are nocturnal for the most part.

Striped skunks produce one litter of young per year. Mating takes place from mid-February through mid-March. Gestation is between 59 and 77 days. This variance in gestation time suggests that delayed implantation is probably involved. Litter size is usually five or six offspring. At birth, striped skunks are blind and deaf. Eyes open at between two and four weeks, they can hear at about three weeks, and they are capable of discharging musk at about four weeks. Young skunks nurse for about a month and a half in the natal den. When they are fully weaned the young continue to follow the mother do not finally disperse from the natal area until about a year after birth once reaching adult size.

Striped skunks will den for long periods during cold weather from November until March but are not true hibernators. In fact, in the southern portions of their range striped skunks remain active year-round. In the northern areas though, females may stay in their winter dens for the entire duration of cold winter periods, but males usually come out to forage during milder temperature. Females with their young will den together during winter. Males may den with females, but most males, especially juveniles, den alone.

Striped skunks prefer fairly open areas with a mixture of cover types such as grasslands, and agricultural clearings and/or woodlands and they are always found within two miles of water. Striped skunks are often found in suburban and even urban areas because of the many sheds, garages or other buildings that they may live in or under.

Home range size for a striped skunk is dependent on the habitat type in which the animal is living, with urban skunks using a much smaller area, about 0.25 square miles. Animals in a rural area may need an area of from 0.4 to 1.5 square miles. This home range size is much smaller in more urban environs due to the greater availability of food and den sites.

A true omnivore and an opportunist, striped skunks eat a wide variety of food items both plant and animal, including insects, small mammals, fish, crustaceans, fruits, grasses, leaves, buds, grains, nuts, and carrion. The skunks diet changes depending on the time of year and available resources.