

Living with Wildlife

Skunks

Skunks are mild-tempered, mostly nocturnal, and will defend themselves only when cornered or attacked. Even when other animals or people are in close proximity, skunks will ignore the intruders unless they are disturbed.

Skunks are beneficial to farmers, gardeners, and landowners because they feed on large numbers of agricultural and garden pests. While young skunks are cute and kittenlike, they are wild animals and it is illegal to keep them as pets (see “Legal Status”).

Two skunk species live in Washington: The **striped skunk** (*Mephitis mephitis*, Fig. 1) is the size of a domestic cat, ranging in length from 22 to 32 inches, including its tail. Its fur is jet black except for two prominent white stripes running down its back. The striped skunk occurs throughout most lowland areas in Washington, preferring open fields, pastures, and croplands near brushy fencerows, rock outcroppings, and brushy draws. It is also seen—or its musky odor noticed—in some suburban and urban locations, particularly near sources of open water.

The **spotted skunk** (*Spilogale putorius*, Fig. 3), also known as the polecat, ranges in length from 14 to 18 inches, including its tail. Its fur is a black or grayish black, with white stripes on its shoulders and sides, and white spots on its forehead, cheeks, and rump.

The spotted skunk occurs throughout west and southeast Washington. The spotted skunk and striped skunk use similar types of habitat, although the spotted skunk is more likely to be seen in and around forests and woodlands, and is not as tolerant of human activity as the striped skunk.



Figure 1. While other animals try to camouflage themselves, the skunk advertises its identity with its bold coloration. Most predators need only one lesson to learn to avoid the skunk at first sight of black-and-white. As shown here with a badger, the striped skunk has two prominent white stripes running down its back.

(From Christensen and Larrison, *Mammals of the Pacific Northwest: A Pictorial Introduction*.)

Facts about Washington Skunks

Food and Feeding Habits

- Skunks will eat what they can find or catch. They have large feet, well-developed claws, and digging is their primary method used to obtain food.
- Some of their favorite foods include, mice, moles, voles, rats, birds and their eggs, and carcasses—also grasshoppers, wasps, bees, crickets, beetles, and beetle larvae.
- Skunks also eat fruits, nuts, garden crops, and scavenge on garbage, birdseed, and pet food.
- Skunks will roll caterpillars on the ground to remove the hairs before eating them. They will also roll beetles that emit a defensive scent, causing the beetle to deplete its scent before they eat it.

Den Sites

- Skunks use underground dens year-round for daytime resting, hiding, birthing and rearing young.
- Dens are located under wood and rock piles, buildings, porches, and concrete slabs—also in rock crevices, culverts, drainpipes, and in standing or fallen hollow trees.
- Skunks may dig their own dens, but more often use the deserted burrows of other animals, such as ground squirrels and marmots.
- Dens are either permanent, or used alternately with other dens.
- Spotted skunks are excellent climbers and may use an attic or a hayloft as a den.

- Skunks do not hibernate; instead, they lower their body temperature and stay inside their dens during extreme cold, plugging the entrance with leaves and grass to insulate them from the cold.
- Female skunks sometimes share communal dens.

Reproduction

- Striped skunks breed from February through March. Spotted skunks breed from September through October and experience delayed implantation; the fertilized egg does not attach to the uterine wall for a period of time after breeding.
- In late April and May, females of both species give birth to four to five young in an underground nest lined with dried grass and other vegetation.
- At around 60 days of age, the mother leads her young out at dusk to forage and hunt. At three months old the skunks are almost full-grown and completely independent.
- Striped skunk families often remain together throughout the winter.

Mortality and Longevity

- Skunks have few predators—hungry coyotes, foxes, bobcats, and cougars, also large owls (which have little sense of smell). Domestic dogs will also kill skunks.
- Skunks also die as a result of road kills, trapping, shooting, and killing by farm chemicals and machinery.
- Striped skunks live three to four years in the wild; spotted skunks live half that long.

Signs of Skunks

Signs of skunks include their tracks, droppings, and evidence of their digging. A musky odor is another sign of their presence. A persistent smell and freshly excavated soil next to a hole under a building or woodpile indicates that a skunk may have taken up residence.

Skunks usually begin foraging after dark and are back in their dens before daylight. While striped skunks are sometimes seen during the day, spotted skunks seldom are—they may not even venture out on bright moonlit nights.

Skunks search for food along established routes and have a home range of less than 2 miles. Since they commonly patrol country roads looking for road-killed animals, vehicles often hit them.

When around skunks, avoid making loud noises, moving quickly, or taking other steps that could be interpreted by the skunk as a threat. If the skunk appears agitated, retreat quietly and slowly.



Figure 2. Striped skunk tracks average 2 inches long by 1 inch wide. The tracks of spotted skunks are similar, but smaller. The long nails of the front foot are the skunk's identifying feature.

(From Pandell and Stall, *Animal Tracks of the Pacific Northwest*.)

Skunks have poor eyesight and will often approach people who are standing still. If this happens, slowly move away from the approaching skunk.

Tracks

Skunk tracks can be found in mud, dirt, or snow around den sites and feeding areas (Fig. 2). Skunk tracks look like domestic cat prints, except they show claw marks and five toes, not four. Unlike cats, skunks can't retract their claws, so each of their toe pads has a claw mark in front of it. Skunk tracks are also usually staggered, unlike domestic cat prints, which are often on top of each other.

Droppings

Look for droppings where skunks have been feeding or digging, or near a den. Droppings look like those of domestic cats and contain all types of food, from insect skeletons, to seeds or hair. Striped skunk droppings are ½ inch in diameter, 2 to 4 inches long, and usually have blunt ends. Spotted skunk droppings are similar looking, but half the size.

Den Entrances

Look for a grass-free, smooth, 3 by 4 inch depression under a woodpile, shed, porch, or similar place. Generally, you will find only one entrance

Getting Skunked

In other animals, musk is used for scent-marking and courtship. Only the skunks have turned musk into olfactory muscle. When an adult skunk or its young are threatened, they may emit a musky fluid from a nozzle-like duct that protrudes from the animal's anus. This fluid—nature's version of tear gas—can be discharged either in a fine mist or in a water-pistol-type stream. It has a stifling, pungent, often gagging odor that can persist for weeks and be detected over a mile away. On a still day, a skunk can discharge musk 12 feet with good accuracy. On a windy day, spray may reach a person standing downwind 18 feet away or more. Because even a few droplets of skunk spray smell so strongly, it doesn't take a direct hit to pick up the odor.

People's reaction to the odor varies greatly. Almost everyone finds it intolerable when in high concentration. Some people become violently ill. Low levels of the odor are still repugnant to most, while a few find them bearable or almost pleasant.

Because skunks have a limited supply of ammunition, they don't waste their defensive spray. A striped skunk can fire five to eight times before it has to reload, which takes about a week.

Fortunately skunks have various ways of warning when they are threatened, giving an intruder ample opportunity to back off. Dogs, however, tend to ignore this warning. That's why it's hard to find a human who has been sprayed, but easy to find a dog that has!

Contrary to popular myth, a striped skunk cannot spray over its back. When threatened it will stomp its front feet and, if the threat continues, it will make short charges with its tail raised in the direction of the threat. Next, the skunk will twist its hind end around so it is headed in the same direction as its snout. If the skunk continues to feel threatened, it will then spray.

Musk produced by spotted skunks is more pungent than that of striped skunks. However, they are less likely to spray, and will climb a fence post or a tree when threatened. When forced to, a spotted skunk will stand on its front feet with its back arched so that the spray is discharged forward (Fig. 3).

The odor-bearing fluid, or musk, is amber in color, oily, and only slightly volatile. Therefore, it goes away "on its own" very slowly. However, it will go away eventually (perhaps in two to four months), even if nothing is done to get rid of the odor. This natural process is greatly slowed in areas with little ventilation and when the musk has penetrated porous materials.

If a person or pet is sprayed, the quicker you do something about it the more completely you can remove the odor. First, if eyes get irritated, flush them liberally with cold water. Next, because skunk spray is highly alkaline, counteract this by washing with mildly acidic substances such as carbolic soap, tomato juice, diluted vinegar, or the following home remedy:

- 1 quart of fresh, 3 percent hydrogen peroxide solution (old HP eventually turns into water)
- ¼ cup of baking soda (bicarbonate of soda)
- 1 teaspoon of a liquid soap that is known for its degreasing qualities

Always mix the solution in a large, open container. A closed container can explode. The mixture will bubble because of the chemical interaction between the baking soda and the hydrogen peroxide. Use the entire mixture while it is still bubbling. Wearing rubber gloves, apply the solution, work it into lather, and leave it on for 30 minutes.

Commercial preparations containing "neutroleum alpha," available from some pet stores, are also effective.

After washing with any remedy solution, follow with a long hot shower. Depending on the severity of the spray, you may have to repeat the process two or three times.

These solutions may be used to eliminate *most* of the skunk odor from people and pets. When washing a dog, wash the body first and then the head to keep the dog from shaking off the mixture. This will make the odor tolerable—only time will eliminate it.

Depending on the severity of the spray, clothing may be soaked in a weak solution of household chlorine bleach, ammonia, or products containing neutroleum alpha. If the clothing has been heavily sprayed, however, your best option may be to discard or burn it, because fabric will hold the skunk odor for a long time.

The above products may also be used to clean odor from inanimate objects. If the odor is inside or under your house, the area will need to be thoroughly aired out. Using fans will help.

Never use bleach or ammonia, at any dilution, on pets. Never use bleach or ammonia on materials you do not want to stain or discolor.

**And remember ... the best remedy is
Don't Get Sprayed!**

and a musky odor will be noticeable. Two-inch long black or white hairs may be found lodged in wood or other rough surfaces surrounding the entry.

Digs

Skunks dig in lawns and other grassy areas; usually several holes appear in the same few square yards. When searching for insect grubs, skunks make small holes 1 to 3 inches in diameter and deep. (Such holes are similar to those made by Eastern gray squirrels.) Larger holes in rougher grass may be evidence of skunks digging for voles or other rodents. Skunks also tear apart logs and dig up nests of wasps and other insects in search of a meal.

Preventing Conflicts

Even though skunks possess a powerful spray defense, they will not spray unless surprised, cornered, harmed, or they need to protect their young. Young skunks are more likely to spray than more experienced skunks.

Occasional skunk sightings in a neighborhood need not be cause for alarm. Because skunks are nomadic, most concerns about them being under sheds, porches, and outbuildings are resolved in due time: skunks just move on.

The most effective way to prevent conflicts is to modify the habitat around your home so as not to attract skunks.

Do not feed skunks. Doing so may create undesirable situations for you, your children, your pets, and the skunks. Skunks that are artificially fed often lose their fear of humans. Artificial feeding also tends to concentrate skunks in a small area, and overcrowding can encourage diseases or parasites. Finally, these skunks might drop in on neighbors who do not want them around. These same neighbors might decide to have the skunks removed.

In addition, feed dogs or cats inside or clean up any spilled or uneaten food before dark, place indoor pet food or other food away from a pet door, and put food in secure compost containers. Also, regularly clean up bird feeding stations.

Prevent access to denning sites. Skunks frequently den under houses, porches, sheds, and similar places. Close off these areas with ¼-inch hardware cloth, boards, metal flashing, or other sturdy barriers. Make all connections flush and secure to keep mice, rats, and other small mammals out. Make sure you don't trap an animal inside when you seal off a potential entry (see the handout "Evicting Animals from Buildings"). To prevent skunks from digging under a building or concrete slab, install a barrier (Fig. 4).

Remove access to shelter. Remove brush piles, lumber piles, and rock piles where skunks might live or hide. Before adopting this method, however, be aware that you are also eliminating habitat for other wildlife species, which you might want to attract.

Enclose ducks and chickens in a secure coop at night. A skunk may dig or otherwise find its way into a chicken coop and kill one or two small fowl, but if several chickens or ducks have been killed at one time, the predator is more likely a weasel, mink, fox, raccoon, or bobcat. If a skunk is eating the eggs of chickens or ducks, you will usually find eggs opened on one end with the edges crushed inward. A skunk cannot easily carry or hold chicken-sized eggs; therefore, the eggshells are rarely moved more than 3 feet from the nest.

To prevent skunks from digging under the coop or pen, create a barrier (Fig. 4).

Protect your pets. To keep pets from being sprayed, keep them inside at night.

Prevent damage to lawns. Because lawns—especially newly created ones—are often heavily watered, worms and

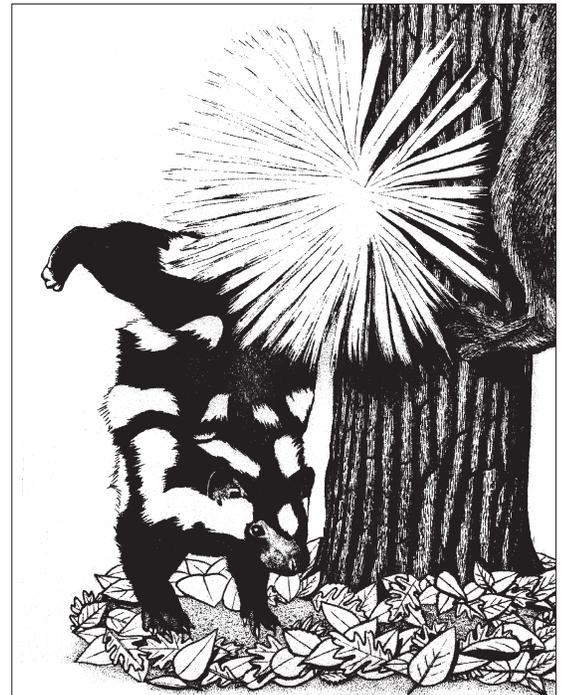
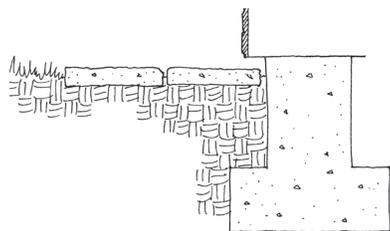


Figure 3. *The spotted skunk has white stripes on its shoulders and sides, and white spots on its forehead, cheeks, and rump. When forced to, it will adopt a defensive posture of standing on its front feet with its hind feet and tail in the air.*

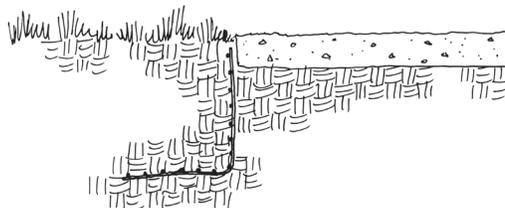
(From Christensen and Larrison, *Mammals of the Pacific Northwest: A Pictorial Introduction*.)

Figure 4. Various ways to install a barrier to prevent skunks (and other burrowing mammals) from digging under concrete slabs, decks, chicken coops, and similar places. To add to the life of any metal barrier, spray on two coats of rustproof paint before installation. Always check for utility lines before digging in an area.

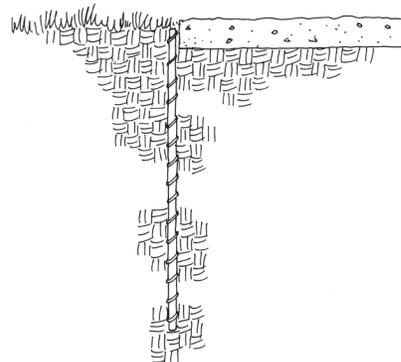
(Drawings by Jenifer Rees.)



a. Lay large flat stones, concrete patio pavers, or 1/4-inch hardware cloth (held in place with stakes) on the surface of the soil next to a concrete slab or wall. The barrier forces animals to begin digging farther out and they will most likely give up in the process.



b. Bend hardware cloth into an "L" shape and lay it in a trench so that the wire goes at least 1 foot below ground and 1 foot out from the concrete slab.



c. Excavate a 3 x 3 inch trench along the side of the slab or wall, and hammer 2-foot lengths of rebar, spaced a few inches apart, into the ground. Cover the tops with concrete or dirt.

grubs inhabit areas just under the sod, attracting skunks (and raccoons). Skunks tend to dig 1- to 3-inch deep holes only where a grub is located; raccoons tend to roll or shred the sod in their search. The use of pesticides to kill worms and grubs is not recommended because of their toxic effect on the environment, people, and animals.

To prevent digging, lay down 1-inch mesh chicken wire, securing the wire with stakes or heavy stones or heavy objects. Alternatively, sprinkle cayenne pepper or a granular repellent, such as Repel®—a commercial dog and cat repellent available at most pet stores or garden centers—over small areas during dry weather.

Surrounding the area with a 2-foot tall chicken-wire fence can protect large areas from **striped skunks**. Support the wire with sturdy wooden stakes or fiberglass stakes every 4 to 6 feet.

To prevent skunks from trying to go under the fence, stake the bottom of the fence flush to the ground, or line the bottom of the fence with bricks, fence posts, or similar items. To prevent the animals from digging under the fence, keep a 1-foot wide wire apron on top of the ground on the skunks' side of the fence. Be sure to secure the apron firmly with rocks or stakes.

To prevent **spotted skunks** from climbing, install a mini floppy fence (Fig. 5). A mini floppy fence constructed of 1-inch mesh wire or heavy plastic needs to be at least 2 feet high and staked so that it's wobbly. The fence should not be pulled tight between the stakes, but rather there should be some "give" so that when a spotted skunk tries to climb the fence, it will wobble, discouraging further climbing. Constructing the fence so that it leans slightly toward the skunk's side will increase its effectiveness. Install an apron as described above to prevent the animal from digging under the fence.

A temporary, single strand of electric wire 5 inches above the ground will also deter skunks.

Skunks in or Under Buildings

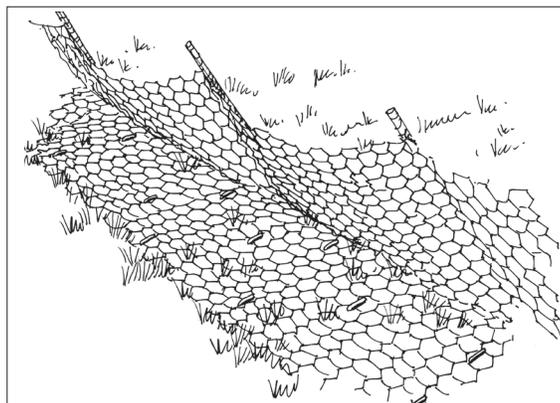


Figure 5. A mini-floppy fence to prevent skunks from climbing.

(Drawing by Jenifer Rees.)

Removing Skunks from Window Wells and Similar Areas

Occasionally, striped skunks get stranded in window wells and similar areas. If this occurs, slowly lower in a rough board that is long enough to act as a ramp from the bottom to the top of the window well. Because striped skunks cannot climb a steep slope, the board should lean at no more than a 45-degree angle. You may need to attach wood cleats or a heavy piece of cloth so that the skunk can grip the board.

Crouch when approaching the area to stay out of sight of the skunk. If possible, have a second person on hand, with a vantage point high enough to see the skunk, and to warn you if the animal is becoming agitated.

Another method is to tie the board to the end of a long pole and lower it into the area. Once the board is placed, keep people and pets away from the area until nightfall, when the skunk should leave on its own. If the skunk doesn't leave, it probably can't get out because the board is positioned at too steep an angle.

Another approach is to place smelly cheese or cat food in the back of a small garbage can or a cat carrier. Slowly lower the can or carrier sideways into the window well with the open end facing the skunk. The skunk will smell the bait and go inside. When it does, slowly raise the skunk and carrier, elevator style, to ground level, keeping your hands on the outside so you don't risk being bitten. Leave the area and the skunk will amble out—probably after it is done eating.

Screen the top of the well to prevent the problem from reoccurring. Commercial well covers are available.

Occasionally a skunk will find a suitable den site in or under a building. Skunks normally occupy a den site for only two or three consecutive nights. However, during the mating and nesting season, females are attracted to warm, dry, dark, easily defended areas, and will remain longer if the setting remains favorable.

You may choose to let skunks occupy an area, such as under an outbuilding, if they don't pose a problem. Should you choose to remove the animals, a wildlife control company can be hired (call your local Fish and Wildlife office for a current list of contacts), or you can complete the process yourself using the steps below. (For detailed information, see the handout "Evicting Animals from Buildings".)

1. Seal all openings except the **main skunk entrance**. Use sturdy wire mesh (1/4-inch hardware cloth or similar materials) to screen vents near ground level in houses and other structures. Tightly seal holes in foundations or under porches to prevent skunks from entering.
2. To determine entry points, you can use "tracking patches" of a fine layer of sand, talcum powder, or dust placed at suspected entrances. Wadded up newspaper lightly stuffed into the entry hole also works great. Skunks will push the paper out of the way when exiting.
3. After dark, when the skunk has left seeking food they will leave tracks at the den entrance. Inspect the powder or the dislodged newspaper for exiting skunk tracks.
4. Once a skunk has left the building, immediately seal the entrance with a hardware cloth "one-way door" (Fig. 6). (You will not want to permanently exclude at this point, not being sure of the number of skunks present.) The one-way door can be made from 1/2-inch hardware cloth that is attached over the opening, and hinged at the top and left loose on the other 3 sides. It should be larger than the opening so that it cannot swing inward. The skunk will push it open to leave, but cannot re-enter.
5. Put a layer of flour on the inside and outside of the door after the one-way door has been installed for two to three nights. Any footprints in the powder should be outside the door with none inside. This means the skunk is out. If you have any doubt, then smooth out the dirt on both sides of the door with your hand or a tool, reapply the powder and observe. Once a couple of days have gone by with no footprints, the skunk is probably gone. Another way to check is to open the door and shove a few pieces of wadded up newspaper

into the skunk's entrance. If the paper stays in place for two to three nights, then the skunk is gone.

6. Once you are sure all skunks are out, permanently seal the opening.

Important Note: Be sure all animals are out before sealing up the entrance. Pay close attention and use extra caution if trying this option during April and May when babies may be in the den.

To try and drive a skunk away, consider harassing the animal. Lighting up the den site with battery operated flashing lights and adding a portable radio can cause a skunk to seek a more suitable habitat. (For detailed information, see the handout "Evicting Animals from Buildings".)

If a skunk finds its way into your house, garage, or other structure, stay calm, close all but one outside door, and let the animal find its own way out. If necessary, you can slowly encourage the skunk to move in a preferred direction while holding a large towel, or a large piece of plastic or cardboard in front of you. If the skunk appears agitated, retreat immediately. Don't use food as a lure—this will make the animal associate food with humans, and return for more. If the skunk appears sick or injured, call a nearby wildlife rehabilitator for assistance. Your local Fish and Wildlife office keeps a list of rehabilitators and can tell you which ones serve your area, or you can look under "Animals" or "Wildlife" in your phone directory.

Trapping Skunks

If all efforts to dissuade problem skunks fail, you may feel the need to trap the animals. Trapping skunks should be a last resort and can never be justified without first applying the above-described preventative measures. Trapping is also rarely a permanent solution since other skunks are likely to move into the area if attractive habitat remains available.

A wildlife damage control company can be hired to do the trapping (call your local Fish and Wildlife office for a current list of contacts), or you can trap the animal(s) yourself. It is usually best to let someone with experience trapping skunks do the work. Because skunks often live in groups, multiple traps are necessary to trap them out of an area. If you choose to do the trapping yourself, follow the steps listed below. (For detailed information, see the handout "Trapping Wildlife.")

Before trapping a skunk, you need know what you are going to do with the animal after it has been captured. There are two options:

- 1) Release the skunk at the site of capture after its reentry into a structure is prevented by physical exclusion.
- 2) Euthanize the skunk. Care should always be taken to guarantee the animal is euthanized humanely. An alternative would be to contact your local wildlife damage control company, veterinarian, animal shelter. They may euthanize the animal for a fee.

While drowning and freezing have long been considered a humane way to deal with problem wildlife, animal experts no longer generally accept these techniques, and they are not considered humane by the American Veterinary Medical Association standards.

While shooting a skunk may sound extreme, in many cases it is the best available method because of its quickness, and it may cause the least amount of stress and pain to the animal. If shooting is used, the operator and firearm must be capable of producing a quick death. To calm down an active skunk, the trap can be covered with a dark towel or other cover.

1. Use a commercially available skunk trap or wrap an existing wire cage trap with canvas or burlap before it is set. Traps should be baited with fish (canned or

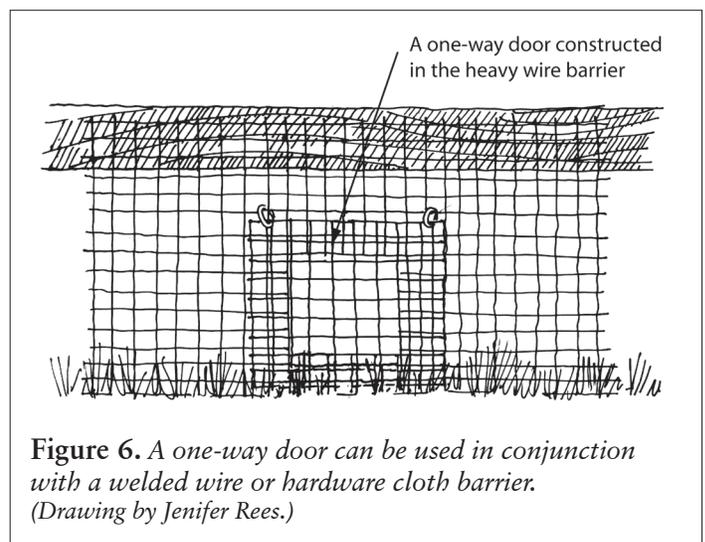


Figure 6. A one-way door can be used in conjunction with a welded wire or hardware cloth barrier. (Drawing by Jenifer Rees.)

fresh), fish-flavored cat food, chicken parts, bacon, or peanut butter on bread.

2. The trap should be set in the trail immediately in front of the burrow's main entrance (Fig. 7). Logs, twigs, boards, or stones placed on either side of a path between the burrow opening and the trap will aid in funneling the animal toward the trap
3. All traps should be checked in the morning and early evening
4. Slowly approach the trapped skunk and cover the trap with an old blanket or piece of thick burlap, if not already set. The covered trap will be less fearful for the skunk and it will be less likely to discharge its scent.
5. If the trap needs to be moved, avoid sudden, jarring movements or loud noises, which may frighten the skunk.
6. To release a trapped skunk, stand more than 20 feet away and release the trap door using a string or fishing line.

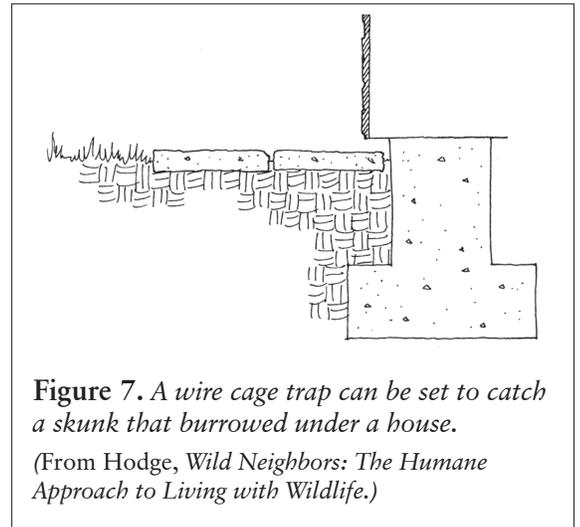


Figure 7. A wire cage trap can be set to catch a skunk that burrowed under a house.

(From Hodge, *Wild Neighbors: The Humane Approach to Living with Wildlife.*)

Public Health Concerns

The diseases or parasites associated with skunk populations in Washington are rarely a risk to humans.

Canine distemper, a disease that affects domestic dogs, is found in skunk populations. Have your dogs vaccinated for canine distemper to prevent them from contracting the disease.

Skunks may also be infected with the bacterial disease **tularemia**.

Never approach a skunk that appears to be ill, is overly friendly, or approaches you. If a person is **bitten or scratched** by a skunk, immediately scrub the wound thoroughly with soap and water. Flush the wound liberally with clean tap water. (In other parts of the United States skunks can carry **rabies**.) Contact your physician and the local health department immediately. If your pet is bitten, follow the same cleansing procedure and contact your veterinarian to ensure that your pet has proper protection.

Anyone handling a skunk should wear rubber gloves, and wash their hands well when finished.

Legal Status

Because legal status, trapping restrictions, and other information about skunks change, contact your Regional Wildlife Office for updates.

Skunks are not classified as game animals or furbearing animals (WAC 232-12-007). People can trap or shoot skunks on their own property when the animals are causing damage to crops or domestic animals (RCW 77.36.030). In such cases, no special trapping permit is necessary for the use of live traps. However, a special trapping permit is required for the use of all traps other than live traps (RCW 77.15.192, 77.15.194; WAC 232-12-142).

It is unlawful to release a skunk anywhere within the state, other than on the property where it was legally trapped, without a permit to do so (RCW 77.15.250; WAC 232-12-271).

Except for bona fide public or private zoological parks, persons and entities are prohibited from importing skunks into Washington State without a permit from the U.S. Department of Agriculture and written permission from the Washington Department of Health. Persons and entities are also prohibited from acquiring, selling, bartering, exchanging, giving, purchasing, or trapping a skunk for a pet or for export (WAC 246-100-191).

Additional Information

Books

Maser, Chris. *Mammals of the Pacific Northwest: From the Coast to the High Cascades*. Corvallis: Oregon State University Press, 1998..

Verts, B. J., and Leslie N. Carraway. *Land Mammals of Oregon*. Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1998.

Internet Resources (General)

Burke Museum's Mammals of Washington

<http://www.washington.edu/burkemuseum/collections/mammalogy/mamwash/>

Prevention and Control of Wildlife Damage

<http://wildlifedamage.unl.edu/>

Internet Resources (Skunk traps and deodorizers)

www.wildlifedamagecontrol.com/skunks/polytrap.htm

Adapted from "Living with Wildlife in the Pacific Northwest" (see <http://wdfw.wa.gov/wlm/living.htm>)

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