

Solving Problems with Skunks



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By Laura Simon

Occasional skunk sightings in a neighborhood need not be cause for alarm. Preventative measures such as covering garbage cans and not leaving pet food out will help discourage their presence. Also, covering openings under patios, porches, and crawl spaces will prevent occupancy. Always make sure no animal is

denning there first.

If a skunk wanders into your garage, don't panic. Just open the garage door before dusk, and wait until the skunk exits for nightly foraging. Sprinkle a wide band of white flour across the threshold, so you can see evidence of exiting footprints. For obvious reasons, keep all domestic animals away from the area. Once the visitor has left, close the door and make sure it stays closed.

Evicting Skunks

Because skunks are nomadic, their residence under your shed, porch or outbuilding will resolve itself in due time: They'll just move on. However, if you must evict skunks from under a building, try spraying a mixture of eight ounces of dish detergent, eight ounces of castor oil, and one gallon of water around the area where the skunks reside. To determine if the den has been vacated, stuff newspaper in the entry hole; if animals are still present, the paper will be pushed out within 24 hours.

The only way to keep skunks permanently out from under a building is to seal the structure off with chicken wire or hardware cloth. It's important to sink the wire down a few inches into the ground, bend it at a 45° angle, and then run at least 12 inches of wire out away from the building in a reverse "L" shape, so a false bottom is created—foiling any skunk who tries to dig back in. A note of caution: Be sure that all animals are out from under a structure before sealing it off; otherwise, the remaining skunks will starve to death.

Windows

Because of their natural nearsightedness and poor climbing ability, skunks often tumble into window wells and are unable to climb out. If the window well is shallow (under two feet), place a piece of wood in the well at less than a 45° angle to serve as a ramp. Make sure the board has a towel or chicken wire tacked to it for traction. If the window well is any deeper, put on heavy gloves, place smelly cheese in the far corner of an animal carrier or plastic rectangular



garbage can tipped on its side, and slowly lower it into the window well. The skunk will be enticed by the cheese and should walk right into the container. Slowly raise the can or carrier, elevator style, to ground level, keeping your hands on the outside so you don't risk being bitten. Leave the area. The skunk will soon amble out. It's essential to then purchase or make a window well cover out of heavy wire mesh fencing, or this situation will recur. If you hire professionals to help remove the skunk, make sure they release the skunk on site.

Trapping

Although people's initial reaction may be to get rid of skunks, trapping will not solve the problem, because skunks from the surrounding area will quickly replace those removed. As long as an inviting habitat (brush or rock piles, elevated sheds, and openings under porches or house foundations) exists, skunks will use it. Trapping merely creates turnover in the population; in springtime, this can result in orphaned, starving skunks wandering around neighborhoods.

Rabies

People often have exaggerated fears about rabies and skunks. In the central United States, skunks may contract their own strain of rabies or serve as a "spillover" species for the raccoon variant that is currently present in the mid-Atlantic and Northeastern states. However, since 1980, only one human death has been attributed to the skunk strain of rabies in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta, the few human deaths from rabies—on average two to three a year, nationwide—have largely been due to the bat strain or canine strains contracted overseas. The bottom line is that people stand a far greater risk of dying from a falling brick or bad hamburger than from skunk rabies. Nonetheless, it's important to take proper precautions by calling your local animal control officer if you observe a sick, disoriented skunk in areas where rabies occurs.

What's That Smell?

Skunks use their strong-smelling spray to defend themselves—in fact they don't have any other form of defense. The spray is composed of sulfuric acid that can be "fired" from either of two independently operating anal glands. Skunks stamp their front feet as a warning when threatened, giving you a chance 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 who has. Skunk odor on wayward pets may be neutralized with liberal amounts of vinegar or tomato juice. This will make the odor tolerable—only time will eliminate it. A reported deodorant recipe for skunk spray that can be used on animals and clothes includes these ingredients:

1 quart 3% hydrogen peroxide
1/4 cup baking soda

1 teaspoon Dawn® liquid dish soap

Apply liberally and hold your nose!

Chlorine bleach, ammonia, or commercial products containing neutroleum alpha may be used on inanimate objects—do not use these on any living thing. Carbolic soap and water are safe to use on skin. Liberal flushing with cold water will ease the discomfort of skunk spray in the eyes.

—*Laura Simon is Urban Wildlife director for The Fund for Animals, New York City*

—*Some information in this page was adapted from Wild Neighbors: The Humane Approach to Living with Wildlife, available from The HSUS.*

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