

Living With Wildlife- Skunks

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Striped skunks (*Mephitis mephitis*) are born around mid-May with their eyes closed. Even though they are covered with only a very fine coat of short hairs their black and white stripes are already clearly visible.

In early summer, at about 7 weeks old, young skunks start coming out with mom to explore their surroundings and to learn how to forage for food. Although there can be as many as 10 kits in a litter, the average litter size is 4-6. Most who witness mom taking the young out are impressed with the discipline of the kits, who follow close behind mom in a single file line.

A mother skunk will sometimes select a den under a step or shed to have her babies but this is a temporary situation. Soon after the babies are big enough to come out of the den to forage for food, mom will move them to a more natural location.

Skunks have long claws that are great for excavating to find a range of food including mice, beetles, earthworms, amphibian eggs, ants, slugs and berries.

While most animals' colouration is intended to help them blend into their surroundings, skunks have taken a different approach. Their bold colour pattern acts as a warning letting possible predators know they are armed and dangerous.

Although a skunk's spray is a very potent and effective deterrent they are by no means trigger happy and spraying is usually a last resort. The spray is a chemical that is used to defend against predators and to mark their territory during mating season. When threatened the skunk will raise and fluff its tail, stamp its front feet and show its backside in an effort to deter a predator.

Unfortunately for dogs, these warnings seem to encourage them more, and it is common for dogs to get sprayed. A good way to avoid this is to give the skunks in your yard some warning before letting your dog out. By simply turning on a porch light and making some noise you will give the skunk all the warning it needs to move along and avoid a confrontation with your dog.

In the meantime, remember this is the height of the birthing season for wildlife. Do not take any action before first checking www.wildlifeinfo.ca for effective advice.