

BOREAL BITS

PHIL BURKE



JOHN'S SKUNK

'Never get into a spraying match with a skunk.' Mark Hatfield

The call came early in the morning in late June. “Something dug up my lawn last night. What could it be? Is your lawn okay?” I told him I would check and get back to him although right off the bat I smelled a skunk. In fact Pat and I had noticed skunk odor lingering on the air the night before.

In this area we are no strangers to the striped skunk whose Latin name, *Mephitis mephitis*, translates as ‘a noxious exhalation,’ and there are few among us who won’t agree with this descriptor. Our old dog found this out a few times and being a terrier, he is one of the dogs that just won’t heed the black and white danger sign. Henceforth, whenever we smell a skunk we take Norm out on a leash at night.

Our lawn was untouched but when I checked out John’s lawn, I was surprised at the damage. Sod was upturned and soil was scattered about in at least two-dozen different spots on his otherwise nicely groomed lawn. The conical holes ranged between 3-10 cm (1 –5 in) deep and up to

half as wide. We have had skunk damage in the grassy areas of our property but never to the extent experienced by neighbour John. Repair would involve raking the soil into the holes, and replacing the sod.

Skunks are especially fond of insects. In spring and fall the animals often dig into soil in search of grubs or other larvae. June beetle larvae can be a substantial mouthful. Anyone who has kept bees in this area knows that skunks can destroy hives to satiate their taste for bees or their larvae. In addition to insects, skunks will eat mice, other rodents, amphibians, small reptile, carrion, fruits, vegetables, ground-nesting hatchlings and eggs. There is nothing quite like an omnivore to assure success in the wild.



(We have no photos of skunks and therefore proudly present this instead. P Burke)

A skunk shoots its musk by compressing the two glands on either side of its anus causing a misty stream to shoot forth with surprising accuracy within 3 metres. The spotted skunk, a smaller version of our striped skunk, will spray an aggressor by standing on its front feet facing its target with its back arched so that the glands face forward. The striped

skunk will give a warning by stamping its feet with tail raised—in most cases—and if this doesn't deter the real or perceived threat, it will twist its body into a u-shape with nose and tail facing the same direction and let fly. Contrary to popular myth, skunks do not spray urine; also they do not flick the foul-smelling musk with their tails.

It is rare that skunks wander in broad daylight. They are nocturnal animals, the dampness and darkness of night serving them well as they aimlessly search for food. Fortunately, the white stripe is present and has saved us many a time from getting too close (i.e. within spray range) during warm summer evening walks.



(Skunk lunch – a June Bug larva. Photo Wm. Burke)

Our dog Norm is a pretty smart animal except when it comes to skunks. It may be the terrier in him but he just won't learn that attacking the black and white critters is not necessarily a good idea. As his vet said, "Some dogs just won't learn." One 'skunking' that is more memorable than the others occurred during one late summer evening when Norm went into his pen for his regular duties. His pen is fenced and located

partially under the deck where we keep boards and other important items. Norm trotted down his dog stairs and immediately started barking. This was followed by the stench of skunk. I called him and he ran up the stairs at which time I closed the trapdoor to his stairway. He was still very agitated and disappointed he couldn't go down again. Of course he had been skunked but in all fairness he was in his own pen. I decided to investigate and with Norm on a leash went into the pen through the ground level door. Norm pulled to a pile of timber and started whining and digging. I tied him up outside and carefully removed a few boards to reveal an absolutely terrified half-grown skunk staring back at me. I slowly backed away and left the gate to the pen open. In the morning it was gone. Norm and the skunk were in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Skunks have more than Norm to worry about. Some great horned owl nests can be located by following the stench of skunk odor because it takes more than a spray to discourage those night predators. Also, on a recent trip along a Northwestern Ontario highway we were surprised to see a red fox trotting proudly across the road carrying a small skunk in its jaws. It seems that the chemical protection, though good, is not infallible.

As for John's skunk, the secret to getting rid of the skunk is to get rid of the insects that provide the skunk with a reason for digging. The situation is akin to the bear problem; feed them and they will return. They were obviously being fed or they wouldn't have wasted the energy digging holes. Another solution is to fence the lawn to keep out the perpetrator or, in that John mentioned this is the first time in almost twenty years that he has experienced the problem, he can wait it out