

Striped Skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*)

by Ranger Jim Serpa

Working nights at Doheny, one can't help but notice those waddling black and white images moving to and fro across the lawns in North Day Use. Doheny has a fairly large population of striped skunks. Hardly a night goes by without spotting three or four.



Unlike many animals that try to blend in with the environment, the skunk does just the opposite. Its jet black body with white stripes down its back proclaim to all that see it to back off; you don't want any part of me. And you don't!

Although the skunk doesn't discharge its vile scent without good reason, it will not hesitate to let go with a spray if really threatened. The striped skunk holds about a tablespoon of the oily yellow musk in its scent glands which are located at the base of its tail. This amount is good for five or six jet sprays even though more than one is rarely needed. Each spray is amazingly accurate and can travel up to 15 feet. The mist from the spray may travel 30-50 feet with the odor carrying up to a mile.

The standard antidote for the unlucky few that get a dose of the spray has always been tomato juice or ammonia. Carbolic soap and water is usually recommended for washing the skin. I saw in a recent "Outside" magazine article that a chemist from Humboldt State University claims that good old fashioned laundry soap works best. My personal favorite is to avoid getting sprayed at all.

Skunks will usually display certain characteristics before letting loose. Here is what to look for: skunks will often stomp their feet up and down and will make short rushes, hissing and growling. When the skunk finally believes that it is in for a fight, it will do a hand stand arching its back and thus pointing its scent gland toward the unlucky victim. All this while taking its eyes off of the intended recipient of the spray. This is definitely a major clue to move back or face the consequences.

Skunks are usually nocturnal, preferring the cover of darkness to meander about searching for mice, insects, grubs, eggs or fruits. The skunks at

Doheny have taken quite a liking to the trash cans and organisms living under the grass. Many a night I've seen small tufts of grass scattered about, the remnants of a skunk's foraging habits.

Skunks have a few predators and if you exclude man and the menace of the automobile, only the Great Horned Owl is of major concern to this striped fellow's safety. It's said that in harsh times cougars, coyotes and bobcats have been known to attack skunks, but after one unsuccessful attempt I can't imagine these predators ever trying again.

Though skunks do not hibernate, they do become inactive for long periods of time during the cold winter months. The skunk can awaken from this sleep if the need arises or the weather warms up for a prolonged period of time.

The females mate in early spring and after about eight weeks give birth to three to eight hairless, toothless and blind infants. These baby skunks are weaned at six to seven weeks just after their scent has developed, but before reaching full potency.

Striped skunks are found throughout the United States preferring to live in second hand burrows, stumps, wood and rock piles, or beneath buildings. Unfortunately for the skunk they are the chief carrier of rabies in America today.

The Doheny skunks actually help the night Ranger perform their duties. As you can imagine, after-hours human visitors are less than thrilled about staying around after they find out that they are sharing the North Day Use with our black and white friends.