



Milwood Animal Clinic

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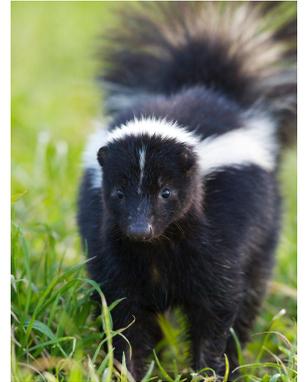
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Care of Skunks

Skunks have been reported as pets all the way back to Native American nations. Traditionally, the striped skunk had been classified as a Mustelid and considered closely related to ferrets, weasels, otters, and badgers. As DNA hybridization has become more heavily applied to phylogenetic data, the skunks have now been classified into their own family, the Mephitidae. There are currently 12 species in the family, including the hooded skunk, spotted skunk, hog-nosed skunk, and stink badgers. The striped skunk is most commonly kept as a house pet.



Natural History

Skunks are native to the Americas and can be found from southern Canada throughout most of the United States (excepting the hot deserts) clear down to central Mexico. They tend to be found in urban areas, and like to den under man-made structures and around open areas such as parks. They will burrow into the ground and live in dens and also will sometimes nest above ground. Most skunks will choose to den solitarily, but in the northern part of their range, may choose to live in small groups. Skunks are not true hibernators and will be active when the weather is mild.

Breeding season is February through March, with the young being born in April until early June. In general skunks, enter estrus only once per year, but if the litter is lost early, may rebreed. Skunks are born blind, deaf, and naked, with their scent gland intact and are able to spray within a week of their birth. They are born with stripes in their skin before fur even begins to emerge. They have triangularly shaped heads and faces, a very small nose, and tiny, rounded ears. Their eyesight is not very keen, however, and they rely much more heavily on both their sense of smell and hearing to navigate their environment. Although the most common color pattern of the skunk is black and white, many colors, including brown and red, are found in the wild. As breeding has occurred for the pet trades, many other colors have been "developed" including cream, apricot, grey, and albino.

****Only a small number of states allow skunks as pets, and others require permits in order to keep a skunk. It is very important for Owners and potential Owners to know the legal status of the skunk in their state. You can start by doing research and contacting the proper authorities, some helpful information to get you started can be found at www.skunkhaven.net/StatesForm.htm.****

Personality and Socialization

The average striped skunk is similar in size to a petite house cat, and in fact, share many personality traits with the domestic cat or pet ferret. It is important to note that they tend to be crepuscular, meaning they are most active near dawn and dusk, some will be truly nocturnal, which can be problematic for some Owners. They are inquisitive, friendly, and very curious. They are able to open cabinets and dig their way out of most any barrier, including carpet. This digging behavior needs to be addressed by owners early by offering them a specific place they

are allowed to dig and then training them to dig only in that area.

Skunks are very friendly, entertaining, loving, and playful, but can also be very headstrong and stubborn. If not well socialized, they can be aggressive animals. Skunks are high maintenance pets and need to be handled frequently and lovingly, as well as trained, in order to make good pets. Social training should start from a very young age and persist throughout adulthood. Skunks are quick to learn games, play with toys, and create their own means of entertainment, and all of these things should be encouraged to stimulate the intelligent and curious nature of this animal.

Appropriate toys include items like ping pong balls, tennis balls, paper bags, cardboard boxes, socks tied into knots, as well as the multitude of puppy and kitten toys on the market.

Litter Box Training

Skunks can be successfully litter box trained, or at a minimum, corner trained, since they are by nature latrine animals. As a rule, the easiest method is to allow the skunk to choose the corner with they intend to use, and then place a high-backed uncovered cat litter pan, with unscented litter, in that area. With luck, the skunk will choose to use that spot. If not, clean the mess with vinegar to reduce the odor and try again. Once the skunk is reliably using the box, move it slowly to an area which you consider acceptable. Sometimes the skunk will follow, and sometimes it may be necessary to give in and allow the skunk to use the spot it has chosen, considering yourself lucky that at least it will use the litter pan!

Housing

Most pet skunks are not kept caged when at home, but allowed free access to the home, much as a pet cat would be allowed. They should, however, be provided a place to make a "den" such as a dog crate or cardboard box filled with clean blankets. This helps them to feel safe when resting and provided a retreat from day to day activities. Young skunks should be confined to smaller spaces, much as one would a puppy, to facilitate potty training, silly behavior they may lead to injury, and contain destruction caused by digging, chewing, climbing, and stealing coveted objects.

Diet

Skunks are opportunistic omnivores, with essentially means they will eat virtually anything they come upon. Properly feeding a skunk is one of the largest challenges in owning a skunk and malnutrition is one of the most common problems encountered. Skunks have tremendous appetites and will eat almost anything, even if it is nailed down. This leads frequently to obesity by well meaning pet Owners. Many owners are not properly educated on the correct diet for their skunk, so many skunks are fed a combination of cat food and junk food, neither of which leads to long term health.



For Captive skunks, a healthier diet rather than a "natural" one may be preferred for the long run. They are more sedentary than wild skunks, are not exposed to the same predatory stresses, and are therefore more likely to be more long lived. For these reasons, a varied healthy diet is likely to provide more long-term health to the pet skunk. Many Owners will feed their skunk cat food, which is too high in fat and protein for skunks and can lead to long-term health consequences. Mazuri makes an Omnivore Diet that is appropriate for skunks with added greens, veggies, fruits, bugs, and the occasional hard boiled egg. A high quality dog food can be used in place of

Mazuri Omnivore Diet, if it is unavailable in your area. Supplementing calcium and taurine are also recommended.

DO NOT FEED THE FOLLOWING: Iceberg lettuce, cat food (cat food is too high in fat and protein), sweets, chocolate, fried foods, chips, lunch meat, hot dogs, seeds, artificial sweeteners like Nutrasweet, asparagus, onions, grapes, or raisins.

For detailed recommendations, recipes, and more information go to www.skunkhaven.net/DietNutrition.htm.

Monitor the weight of your skunk and make sure it is not getting too fat or too thin. A simple technique to determine how much fat an adult skunk has is to feel the base of the tail, there should be a ball of fat that gently tapers down the tail. If there is no fat at the base of the tail, you can feel the bones of the tail easily, the skunk is too thin. If you can't easily feel the bones about two-thirds of the way down the tail the skunk is getting overweight.

Spraying Skunks

One of the first things to come to everyone's mind is the spraying skunk. Fortunately, most legally obtained skunks have already been descented prior to sale. However, a well socialized intact skunk will rarely spray unless they feel significantly threatened. Even when threatened, the skunk demonstrates a series of warning signals prior to spraying. Be aware, though, that the young skunk will also display these signals in play, so it is important to assess the situation and determine whether the skunk is bluffing/playing or whether it is really feeling threatened.



The vast majority of skunks will run away rather than spray, and will only resort to spraying when cornered and not able to escape. In almost all circumstances, if the skunk has an exit route, it will take that to avoid confrontation.

Before spraying, the skunk will stomp the ground with both front feet, raise their tail, and charge forward a few paces, followed by stomping or edging backwards several paces again (sometimes dragging their front feet). As they do this they will often make direct eye contact with the intruder, so the body is curved into a "c-shape" with both the front and rear portions aiming the spray.

Health and Medical Issues

Skunks are prone to a variety of health concerns and issues. Unfortunately, skunks are often presented to the Veterinary Hospital for the treatment, and not prevention, of disease conditions. However with good routine preventative care, many conditions can be avoided in pet skunks. First and foremost, a proper diet must be fed. Malnutrition in any form, too many/too few calories or inappropriate food choices, can result in multiple metabolic disorders. **Metabolic Bone Disease** is a common condition in younger skunks as a result of a calcium/vitamin D deficient diet. Taurine deficiency is suspected to result in cardiomyopathy in the skunk, as with the domestic cat. Preventative education on proper diet will go a long way to prevention treatment for these debilitating and life-threatening conditions.

Spaying and neutering is also as important in our skunk companions as it is in domestic dogs, cats, and ferrets. Males may develop aggression issues if not neutered, and females may develop pyometra as well as complications associated with extended estrus periods. The procedure is

done much like for our other companion species, and anesthesia is similar to dogs and cats. Most skunks are spayed/neutered at 3-5 months of age. Declawing is NOT recommended in this species as skunks use their claws to handle food, regular trimming of the nails is appropriate and necessary.

Internal parasite prevention and treatment is also an important preventative health factor in the pet skunk. Skunks are prone to roundworms, which does have a zoonotic potential. Many young skunks arrive in the adoptive homes prior to the appearance of eggs in the feces, so it is important to test and deworm accordingly.

Dental disease is also a common disease condition particularly as the skunk ages and if it not being fed an appropriate diet. High-carbohydrate diets, such as dry cat food, may actually accelerate the tartar build up on skunk teeth. Regular dental care, including home brushing by owners and professional cleanings as needed, is indicated for all skunk patients. If introduced at a young age, many skunks are quite tolerant of this process.

Vaccinating

Vaccinations are important to the overall wellbeing of the pet skunk. Most veterinarians recommend both Rabies and Distemper vaccines. It is critical to realize that most states do not consider a skunk to be protected from rabies even if it is vaccinated, and that the skunk would be treated as an unvaccinated animal if there is any issue of potential exposure or a bite wound is reported. Clients are well cautioned to be proactive to prevent any questionable issue from occurring rather than try to recover from it, even if the skunk has been appropriately vaccinated.

Care of Skunks – Review

- Skunks belong to their own family, the Mephitidae.
- Native to the Americas.
- Not true hibernators. Can have nocturnal tendencies.

- Require socialization starting at a young age.
- Very curious and intelligent, gets them into trouble sometimes.
- Similar personality to a cat or a ferret.

- Can be litter box trained or corner trained.
- Need to be provided a place where they are allowed to dig.
- Young skunks should be confined to avoid destruction, injury, chewing, and digging.
- Like to play with toys, should be encouraged for mental stimulation.
- Need a 'den' area provided.

- Skunks are opportunistic omnivores, meaning they will eat anything if given the chance.
- A proper diet is dire to long term health.
- Variety in limited quantities is the key to success for feeding.

- Observe daily for changes in eating habits, stools and activity.
- Seek preventative veterinary care, not just treatment.
- Plan regular examinations with your veterinarian

