



Eastern Spotted Skunk

North Carolina Wildlife Profiles



Neil Pearson

Eastern Spotted Skunk

(*Spilogale putorius*)

The Eastern Spotted Skunk, often nicknamed a civet or polecat, is one of two native skunk species found in North Carolina. The other is the striped skunk. It is a small, relatively slender skunk that historically ranged from the Continental Divide through much of central and southeastern United States, as well as northeastern Mexico. There are three sub-species of Eastern Spotted Skunk, with the Appalachian sub-species (*Spilogale putorius interrupta*) occupying the Appalachian Mountains of the southeast United States. In North Carolina, spotted skunks are found only in the mid-to upper elevations of the mountains, though their historic range also included the western Piedmont. Unlike the more uniform distribution of striped skunks, spotted skunks are very localized in their distribution.

Description

Spotted skunks are jet black with broken white stripes and white spots. They have a distinctive triangular white spot on the head between their eyes and a variable amount of white fur on the end of the tail. With respect to body shape, they are similar to striped skunks although much smaller. Adult spotted skunks are about the size of a large tree squirrel and weigh 1 to 4 lbs. Males are usually about 7 percent larger than females. The front paws are much longer than those on the hind feet and they can be used for climbing, digging, or restraining prey.

History and Status

The Eastern Spotted Skunk has experienced a >90% decline across its range starting in the 1940s. The exact causes that led to this decline are currently unknown, but hypothesized to be linked to habitat loss and fragmentation, unregulated over-harvest, changes in agricultural methods, widespread use of pesticides, increased aerial predators (e.g., owls, hawks), competition with other meso-mammals (e.g., raccoons, striped skunks, and coyotes), and disease. In the central and southern Appalachian region, very little is known about the distributional status or ecology of this species. Recent anecdotal evidence suggests that the spotted skunk has been uncommon or largely absent from most of the central and southern Appalachians over the last two decades, with only occasional sightings and captures. Spotted skunks are classified as a furbearer and may be taken during regulated trapping seasons, though very few are taken due to the increased selectivity of trappers.

Habitats & Habits

Spotted skunks prefer rocky areas or cover, as that helps them hide from potential aerial and terrestrial predators, and can provide den sites. In the Appalachian Mountains, they are found in young, dense forest stands (< 50 years old) and mature forest

Eastern Spotted Skunks have been described as “acrobats” due to their various defensive postures.



Spotted skunk displaying defensive posturing



Robin Eng/Clemson University

Range and Distribution

In North Carolina, spotted skunks are found in the mountains and western Piedmont.

Range Map



■ Spotted Skunk Range

Spotted Skunk

Wildlife Profiles - North Carolina Wildlife Resources Commission

stands with extensive shrub cover. Dead and downed trees and abundant course woody debris provide important microhabitats. In some southeastern states, spotted skunks have been associated with old fields and hedgerow habitats. Unlike striped skunks, spotted skunks are tree climbers, and may den or rest above ground. Dens are used for resting, protection from inclement weather and predation, and raising of young. Spotted skunks typically locate dens within existing protective cover including shrubs, debris piles, burrows, hollow logs/stumps, tree cavities, and under and between rocks. Spotted skunks are active all winter.

As with striped skunks, spotted skunks have the ability to expel a noxious deterrent spray from specialized glands around the anus when threatened. Another defensive behavior they exhibit is a defensive posture in which they do a hand-stand on their two front legs, with their tail extended vertically into the air and their hind legs spread apart. While in this handstand position, they can move towards the threat, balancing themselves on their forelegs and directing their anal glands toward the danger. They will also stomp the ground with their front paws to deter potential predators. These defensive behaviors are made even more dramatic, as their striking fur pattern is further emphasized.

NCWRC Interactions

The 2005 North Carolina Wildlife Action Plan (NCWAP) categorized the Eastern Spotted Skunk as a priority mammal species and the 2015 NCWAP listed the spotted skunk as one of two mammals in Order Carnivora that was a research priority, due to the large knowledge gaps that exist for the species. Between 2001 and 2014, 25 observations had been verified in 12 counties in the western portion of the state. Starting in winter 2015, an annual winter camera trap study on Eastern Spotted Skunks was initiated by the Commission. The Commission also initiated a cooperative research project with Clemson University that will increase our understanding of the basic life history traits (e.g., mortality factors, survivorship rates, habitat use, movements, reproduction) of the Eastern Spotted Skunk in order to determine its population status (i.e., increasing, decreasing, stable). This will inform the Commission on actions that can be taken to better survey, monitor and manage this species. The Commission also encourages the public to report if they believe they have seen a spotted skunk at: <https://www.inaturalist.org/projects/eastern-spotted-skunk>.

For More Information

Eastern Spotted Skunk Conservation Plan. 2018. Authored by the Eastern Spotted Skunk Cooperative Study Group.

Eastern Spotted Skunk. Jay Butfiloski and Tom Swayngnam. South Carolina Department of Natural Resources.

Mammalian Species: *Spilogale putorius*. 1995. Al Kinlaw. The American Society of Mammalogist.

easternspottedskunk.blogspot.com

<https://easternspottedskunk.weebly.com/>

Wild Facts

Classification

Class: Mammalia

Order: Carnivora

Average Size

Weight: 1 to 4 pounds

Length: Body length is ~9 to 11 inches.

Males generally are approximately 7-10 percent larger than females.

Food

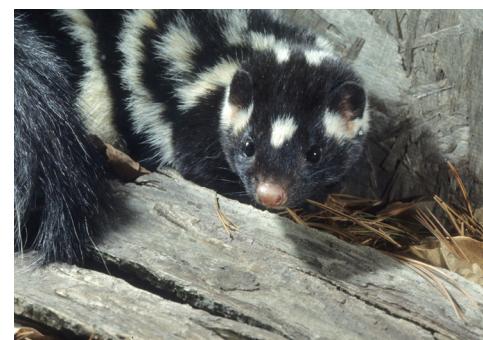
Skunks are omnivorous. Insects are an important source of food for spotted skunks. Skunks also eat: small mammals, crayfish, salamanders, lizards, snakes, chipmunks, rabbits, eggs, carrion, and garbage. Plant foods eaten include: many species of berries, persimmons, nuts, roots, grain, and other vegetation. The amount of plant foods eaten usually increases during the fall.

Breeding/Young

Spotted skunks breed in late winter and early spring. Gestation is estimated at 45-60 days. One to six kits are born in burrows, hollow trees, woodpiles, or rocky crevices from April through July. The kits are weaned at approximately 8 weeks of age and are the size of adults in 3 months.

Life Expectancy

Although skunks may live to be 10 years old, they normally live only about 3 years in the wild. Predation and disease are thought to be the primary natural causes of skunk mortality. Many animals prey on kit and adult skunks including: foxes, coyotes, dogs, eagles, owls, cats and bobcats.



John MacGregor