



South Plains skunks out and about in 'fall shuffle'

Rabies not common, but still better to be cautious

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You're strolling through your neighborhood on an early morning walk or jog, and then you smell it.

A few seconds later, you catch a glimpse of its furry, black tail, tall and erect in the moonlight.

If you have more of those skunk encounters lately, it's probably not your imagination.

The South Plains has reached what Kia Riemath calls the fall shuffle — young skunks are growing big enough to leave their parents' side and start exploring.

"It's just that time of year," she said.

Another likely time to see them is in February — their mating season — said Dr. Robert Bradley, director and curator of mammals for the Texas Tech Museum's Natural Science Research Laboratory

Riemath, Lubbock's assistant director of animal services, has not noticed huge differences in the number of skunk reports among Hub City neighborhoods. There might be a few more around the edges of town, but not significantly.

"We see 'em in the heart of Lubbock," she said.

If you see them near your house, she advises calling her office to set a trap. After that, check the trap daily; even more often is ideal.

"We don't want an animal trapped more than 24 hours," she said.

That's why animal services does not set traps during inclement weather or right before a holiday weekend. If staff find, say, a feral cat or a rabbit in the trap, they'll likely release it. Skunks, though, are always euthanized.

Species, signature scent

Any skunk you encounter in Lubbock is probably a striped skunk.

Bradley listed four other species found in Texas: Western spotted, Eastern spotted, hooded and hognose.

The hooded skunk is nearly extinct, he said; spotted skunks are too secretive to venture into human territory. Hognose skunks are fairly common around Abilene south to the Trans-Pecos area.

Skunks' signature odor-spraying is nature's way of helping the creatures deter predators.

"It works quite well — people usually leave skunks alone," Bradley said.

The internal gland in striped skunks is about the size of a golf ball, the scientist said. When threatened, they apply pressure to spray the scent out of a nipple-like structure next to the anus.

Most skunks have to spray their target with their rear end facing them. An exception is the spotted skunk, which can look directly at you while it sprays.

Early skunk forms probably evolved about 15-20 million years ago, Bradley said.

Skunks are in the same family with weasels and ferrets, he added. Like plenty of other critters, those produce a tiny scent to attract mates or claim territory.

The foul-odor emission as a defense mechanism is an example of a useful trait evolving even further.

Bradley: "The scent gland probably started out that way. Skunks have just taken this to an entirely new level."

Health risks

The scent won't actually hurt you; being sprayed is more of a nuisance than a genuine health concern.

You face greater danger — but a smaller statistical likelihood — if a skunk bites you. Skunks are known to carry rabies and distemper.

But don't panic — cases are not common.

"It's not running rampant this year," said Karen McDonald, a zoonosis control specialist for the Texas Department of State Health Services.

In fact, her department has only seen two rabies cases so far this year in its 41-county region that encompasses the South Plains and Panhandle. One was in Hall County; the other in Hansford.

Last year the region saw 17, including one in Lubbock. Most were a few hours north, with 11 in Ochiltree County, along the Oklahoma border.

But the South Plains' low incidence doesn't mean you should ignore a skunk bite.

McDonald: "It's not to say it doesn't happen."

If it does happen, seek medical treatment. And because dogs and cats are particularly at risk for skunk encounters, keep their shots updated.

"The best way to protect your dogs and cats is to have them vaccinated against rabies," McDonald said. "The average individual is not gonna go pick up a skunk, but they will play with their pets, so to protect your family you protect your pets."

Rabies symptoms

Rabid skunks tend to show behavior changes.

McDonald described two forms of rabies:

- **Furious:** You're probably familiar with this form of rabies from TV and movies. Infected animals become much more aggressive.

"Anything that stimulates them, they will attack."

- **Dumb:** Victims suffer from paralysis. They may appear more docile or stumble around, seeming almost drunk.

And because skunks are nocturnal, encountering them in the middle of the day could suggest something's wrong.

Avoiding encounters

Riemath, the animal services spokeswoman, advises against leaving trash or pet food outside.

If you do encounter one, try to remain calm and keep your distance.

“Don’t freak out if you see ‘em,” she said.

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Source: Kia Riemath, City of Lubbock assistant director of animal services

Skunk spray clean-up recipe:

- 1 quart 3 percent hydrogen peroxide.
- 1/4 cup baking soda
- 1-2 teaspoons liquid dish soap
- (No water)
- Mix chemicals, place on affected area, allow to stay 5 minutes, then rinse off.

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