

The Unflappable Skunk

Last fall, I often camped out in my yard hoping to visit with Thistle, the orphaned porcupine, when he came by for his bowl of milk. I'd leave the bowl near my head so I'd wake up when he arrived, and most nights he did. One night, I was awakened by the sound of milk being lapped from the bowl, which surprised me since porcupines don't lap, they suck. I saw a beautiful skunk enjoying Thistle's meal. Because I know a few things about skunks, I felt pleased to have such an encounter. The skunk soon finished his meal and sauntered on. Skunks and porcupines have a few things in common: both have a remarkably secure defense system, are active at night, use black and white coloration as a warning and most of their potential predators have the good sense to leave them alone. As a result, porcupines and skunks have the luxury of being among the most relaxed wild animals you are likely to encounter. You can feel perfectly comfortable in the vicinity of skunks as long as the skunk is comfortable in the vicinity of you. Skunks have a limited amount of spray in their arsenal and it takes a while to recharge; the spray is a weapon of last resort. If they feel nervous, they will pause, look at you, and stomp their front feet. If you move toward them, they next try a handstand to display their bold stripes. Unfortunately, many dogs do not read the skunk warning signs but just charge right in.

When a skunk decides to use the nuclear option, it swivels so that its face and butt are both pointing at the threat, it then ejects its two spray nozzles and aims at the eyes of the presumed predator. A full blast can travel twelve feet. The thiols in the spray are such potent irritants that they can cause nausea and temporary blindness.

At Bonnyvale we sometimes get calls from people wondering what to do about a skunk that has taken up residence where it isn't welcome. Skunks use dens in two seasons, in the spring/early summer when mothers are raising kits, and in the winter when they

spend much of their time in deep sleep. If there is an important reason to evict the skunks, here is a simple way to do it—skunks hate the smell of original scent Pine-Sol. A rag or block of wood soaked in the cleanser and placed as close as possible to a den entrance will often be enough to persuade a skunk to move her family to an alternate den site.

It might seem humane to trap and relocate skunks you don't want around. It isn't. An animal on its own turf knows of multiple den sites, good food sources, places that are safe, places that are dangerous, and who the neighbors are. When they are relocated, they know none of this, and what's more, you will, in all likelihood, be releasing the animal into territory already claimed by another skunk. If mothers are trapped and moved, you will be leaving young to starve. Even if you trap and move them all, unless they are moved all at once, they will not be able to find each other. This is true for all species.

I hope that the next time you see a skunk at close quarters, you will be able to relax and enjoy the experience. If you offer a pleasant greeting, the skunk will know you are there and that you mean no harm and you may be able to watch as it goes about its business of foraging for insects. Have you seen the viral video of the bicyclist's encounter with a family of skunks? Google "skunk family bicycle" to see what pleasures could be yours.

