

April 2008: Meditations on Skunks

"I think I smell a skunk," my husband said the other evening, and then opened the door, allowing the unmistakable perfume of Eau de Pepe le Pew to waft inside. Fortunately for our domestic bliss, I don't mind skunk smell so much in light doses or from a distance. The smell kind of reminds me of over-brewed coffee. (Up close is another matter, of course, unless you're our friend Jodi who has no sense of smell.)

That first hint of skunk scent in the evening air is as sure a sign of spring's true arrival around here as blooming forsythia and the return of singing robins. All those skunks that were waiting out winter under our porches and sheds rouse to the warmer air and, later in spring, the necessity to feed their kittens. On their nocturnal wanderings through the neighborhood, they inevitably encounter its various canine and feline residents.

Though we smell them regularly, we've only seen a skunk pass through our yard a few times. Keying in on those white stripes as the animal humps across your lawn at dusk evokes that same combination of recognition and alarm as realizing that the German Shepard out in your field is really a coyote. We don't let our cat outside, so don't have to worry about accidentally letting in a skunk-sprayed pet. But I think every dog we had when I was growing up was sprayed at least once. And my maternal grandmother had a long-haired white cat that was pink for weeks after being given the good ol' tomato soup treatment for skunk spray.

If you can put your fear of getting doused with pungent musk aside, and your annoyance with the way it digs up a yard, you can perhaps appreciate the fact that a skunk will eat anything--including pests like mice and slugs. And also, like the similarly shunned porcupine, when seen up close, a skunk has a very sweet face.



Photo credit: PGC/Jacob W. Dingel

My paternal grandparents owned several pet skunks long before I was born. My grandparents were pet pioneers, in their way, though "animal wackos" might be a more apt phrase. They had a pet crow named Zeke and a myna bird, both of which they taught to speak a few words. They owned two ferrets decades before it was fashionable. They kept sheep and chickens, some of which were allowed into the house, as well as a goose, who lived in the house at night. And they raised five skunks over a period of several years, as evidenced by many family photos. A skunk kitten is especially photogenic.

Four of the five skunks were de-scented, and therefore safe to let loose in the house. (An important caveat: keeping a wild animal such as a skunk as a pet is now illegal in Maine and several other states). My grandmother likened them to cats and said they were very affectionate. Those four had boring names like Skunky, Stinky, and Stripey. But the one skunk who wasn't de-scented had the memorable, glam moniker of a porn star: Sachet Kitten. Although Sachet Kitten was still in full possession of her scent glands, the story goes that she only raised her tail in warning once--when someone startled her by coming into a room too quickly. But she never sprayed. Unless you rush right up on them, skunks generally give you plenty of other warnings before they spray--stamping their feet, rearing up on their front legs, or growling and hissing.

With its talent of spraying a blinding, nauseating liquid almost ten feet, you would think the skunk would have no enemies. In fact, they are a delicacy to great horned owls. According to one of my favorite old bird books, Edward Howe Forbush's "Birds of Massachusetts" (vol. 2, 1927), "Horned Owls kill and eat many skunks, and seem to care little for the disagreeable consequences of attacking these pungent animals." He adds drily, "Many of the owls I have handled give olfactory evidence of the habit." Forbush also mentions that in addition to skunk remains being found often near owl nests, that the "white on the back of a skunk is [the owl's] favorite mark," and goes on to cite instances of people in white hats being attacked by great horned owls at dusk. I have several times heard the great horned owl referred to as "skunk owl," though most of the old reference books call it "cat owl." I don't know if that latter nickname refers to its physical similarity to cats or its penchant for eating them.

A friend living right in the heart of downtown Camden recently reported a skunk-owl encounter in his front yard. Upon hearing a thud against the house one evening, he stepped out onto his porch to see what had made the noise. In the yard, he saw a skunk scuttling across the yard. And not six feet away

perched a great horned owl, which had perhaps run into his house in pursuit of its favorite prey. My friend had complained of the efforts he had undertaken to dissuade the skunk from living under his shed. Perhaps the owl will be the ultimate, all-natural solution to his skunk "problem."

As obnoxious and exasperating as skunk spray can be, I think the creature gets a bad rap. It's easy to dislike them for their defense mechanism. But we should admire their adaptability in the face of broad wildlife habitat loss: they aren't endangered, they've adapted to living around people very well, and the females even den together, inspiring girl power. They're keeping mice and insect populations down, they remind us that spring has arrived, and, hey, just look at that cute face! And not only that, but they're a food source for what is, in my opinion, one of our most dramatic and beautiful birds--the great horned owl. So what's not to like?

Written by Kristen Lindquist



101 Mount Battie Street, Camden, Maine 04843

ph. 207.236.7091 fax 207.236.0612

email: info@coastalmountains.org