



California Wildlife Center

Patient of the Week

August 2, 2024

Smell Something Skunk-y?



Skunk kit in care at CWC.

Since the beginning of the year, we have admitted 27 Striped Skunk patients. Skunks are often thought of as smelly backyard intruders, but these animals can be helpful to have around and have a lot to offer our environment.

CWC admits many adult and young Striped Skunks, referred to as kits, each season. While in our care, we provide enrichment boxes to help skunks exercise their sense of smell and practice their hunting skills. The boxes can have worms, vegetables, or fruit hidden under leaves for them to find. We also put exercise wheels in the skunk enclosures, to keep them active and engaged.

When our skunk patients are ready to be discharged, we generally limit the number released at any one location. Patients that are admitted as adults will be returned to the general area in which they were found. If a skunk is admitted as a kit, CWC will release the animal in an area that has been assessed as an appropriate habitat to support skunk population. We do this because we want to make sure there are enough resources to give the animal the best chance at survival.

Striped Skunks are difficult to miss with their striking black and white coat. This coloring seems to almost contradict itself. If they were all black, they could use their coat to camouflage, as they are primarily nocturnal, but the white stripe stands out against the darkness of night. Instead, their color pattern is an adaptation that works as one of their defense mechanisms. The noteworthy color combination, called aposematic coloration, warns predators to stay away and tells potential attackers that the animal is poisonous or is equipped with an undesirable defense. Some other animals that have aposematic coloring are poison dart frogs, bees and wasps. This is one of the first defenses these animals have against larger animals and warns them to stay away unless they want to suffer the consequences.



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Striped Skunk patients in outdoor enclosure.

If skunks do become threatened, they have several other defenses before they spray. In fact, skunks will exhaust all their defenses before spraying. Once they emit their noxious odor it takes about 10 days to replenish it. During this time the skunk can be incredibly vulnerable to attack. Before a skunk gives off their odor, they will stomp, hiss, arch their back and puff their fur. Skunk kits are capable of spraying when they are as young as eight days old. Staff and volunteers at CWC are not immune to getting sprayed as often their actions (vaccines and taking blood) are unavoidable but also undesirable to the skunk.

In addition to their notorious spraying defenses, skunks are hugely beneficial to home gardens. They enjoy eating many garden pests that can be crop destroying like weevils, crickets, insect larvae, worms, beetles, spiders, and millipedes. Skunks primarily eat insects but also will eat other vegetation in addition to small reptiles, mammals, and birds. Skunks also enjoy feasting on yellowjackets and are immune to their venom! The patients at CWC, depending on their age, will be fed a diet that closely mimics what they would find in the wild. As kits, they will be fed a special formula but as adults they will eat a custom mix of dry dog food, vegetables, vitamins, and a variety of either mice, mealworms, or crickets.

It is important to note that skunks can carry the rabies virus and members of the public should never touch or interact with them. If you suspect a skunk is injured or orphaned, please call a professional to assess the next best steps.