

Skunks

My family spent a few summers working on a ranch west of the Colorado town of Walden. Our luxurious accommodations, provided by the rancher, consisted of a two-room cabin and an outhouse. We had a wood stove for heat and cooking in the kitchen, but dinners were usually cooked on a fire outside, a few steps from the front door.

The North Fork of the North Platte River flowed 100 feet from the cabin. All in all, it was a perfect place for a kid to spend his summers. I could enjoy my parole from that prison known as school, while the family worked. It was a perfect arrangement, until an unwanted visitor came by.

A skunk decided he wanted to live, and later raise a family, directly under the cabin. The thing about skunks is that they always have a stink to them, even when they are not spraying. That stink filled the cabin, day and night, and at times caused uncontrollable fits of gagging amongst the cabin occupants.

The old man refused to shoot the skunk, insisting that shooting it would cause a release of the yellow fog around the surrounding area and it's occupants. He insisted that, with a little kindness and gentle talk, the skunk would cohabitate with us.

Each evening, while Dad was cooking dinner over a campfire in front of the cabin, the skunk would make an appearance. Dad and skunk would carry on a conversation, discussing everything from his choice of dinner to religion, politics and the recent Cubs game. All this chatter went on while the rest of us would hide in the cabin with the dry heaves from the stench.

Our state has species of skunks that make their home here. The most common, and the one you most likely see around your place, is the striped skunk (*Mephitis mephitis*) that can reach 2 ½ feet in length and weigh a bit over 10 pounds.

The hog-nosed skunk lives in the pinyon-juniper country of southeastern Colorado and reaches the same size as the striped skunk. The other two species are the eastern spotted skunk and the western spotted skunk. Both of the spotted species are much smaller, weighing in at less than two pounds when fully grown. The spotted skunks are somewhat rare to see in Colorado.

All of that being said, it is very tough for normal people to properly identify which particular species of skunk is scurrying around in front of them. Usually all I see is a black and white stink bomb, as I high tail it for places unknown.

Skunks used to be classified as part of the Mustelidae family of weasels and martens but recently reclassified as the Mephitidae family. All of that really does not matter much to us. What really matters is that they have loaded scent glands and know how to use them at a moments notice.

The technical name for the musk, or stink spray as I refer to it as, is called butyl mercaptan. When the skunk feels threatened, the openings of a pair of musk glands on either side of the tail pop up. The muscles will then constrict to disperse the musk as a spray or a thick

stream. Sometimes, you can see a yellow cloud of the toxic mist as it hangs in the air.

The odor is strong enough to leave a person sneezing, coughing, choking, gagging, nauseated and sometimes vomiting. Just the leftover smell would cause my family to have the dry heaves in the cabin.

A skunk will give plenty of warning (usually, but don't count on it) before he launches the spray. The spray is an oily, yellowish colored musk that smells so bad even the skunk can't stand it. Skunk scent has been described as a combination of ammonia, sulfur, sewer gas and garlic.

Once an area has been sprayed, the smell can last a long time. A little rain, or the morning dew seems to reactivate the scent.

If the spray hits your eyes, it can actually cause temporary blindness, lasting for up to 15 minutes. And if that is not enough, a skunk can spray up to eight times, launching the spray up to 15 feet. Once the spray is deployed, it takes at least a week for the skunk to refill those scent glands.

Striped skunks breed in February and March. The litter arrives in May and consists of six-eight kittens. These little rascals are capable of launching the caustic spray once they reach six weeks of age.

I think that breeding season is when the skunks usually try and take up residence under cabins, tool sheds and houses. Perhaps they are looking for a "nesting site."

Skunks are omnivorous, meaning they are not particular about what they eat. They will eat plants, insects, larvae, worms, grubs, rodents, lizards, frogs, snakes, birds, eggs, berries, roots, leaves, grasses and nuts. The skunk diet changes with the season and the availability of food in the area. Thinking about it, I must be omnivorous because I will usually eat anything that is not nailed down.

Skunks are nocturnal and rarely seen during daylight hours. Since skunks are a major carrier of rabies, any skunk seen during daylight, or acting unusual, should be reported to animal control. Because of the rabies concern, all pets and especially dogs should be kept clear of skunks.

Should you happen to get an unwanted skunk, who decides to take up residency, there are a few things you can try. Skunks hate certain odors like citrus, ammonia, mothballs and predator urine (have fun collecting that). Ammonia soaked cotton balls or moth balls placed under your shed might drive a skunk away.

The Colorado Parks and Wildlife Office can offer some guidance about using a live trap to catch them in by using bait. Problem with that becomes skunk disposal, which can lead to you getting sprayed. There are also pest control people who remove skunks professionally.

If a spray does blast you, forget the tomato juice, as it is an old myth that does not work. The most effective mix is 1 quart of 3 percent hydrogen peroxide, ¼ cup baking soda and 2 teaspoons of dish soap. Use this mix on just about anything or anyone



This skunk is just about to launch his caustic spray on someone. This photo was not taken by me, but rest assured, the person who took the picture had to live outside for awhile. (Submitted photo by wiki commons/Skeeze)

sprayed and rinse thoroughly with clean water. A solution of 2 percent vinegar and 98 percent water can help with the odor on pets.

All that being said, it is best not to get sprayed in the first place, which is why I run at the sight of a skunk. I have been told that a skunk makes a great pet, once a vet has removed the scent glands. I sure think it would be fun to walk around with one who has been "descended" on a leash in public.

That skunk was there until we left in September to go back to town. When we returned the next summer he was gone and we never saw him

again. I think Dad missed talking to him, but the cabin sure smelled better.

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I Can't Resist

I have to pose a question to the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Mismanagement Service:

A week ago, there was a three-page story in the Ouray Plaindealer about the problems bears were having with humans. The article went on to tell the sad story of an elderly lady who had perished at the claws of a bear. According to the article, unfortunately she had invited the attack by habitually feeding the bears and other wildlife.

Later in the article, it went on to say that Coloradans had been training the bears to misbehave and the wildlife officials had had enough. It had a picture of the CEO district manager playing with a bear-proof trash can that wasn't properly secured to keep the bears out. One of his enforcers stated all she gets done is responding to bear conflicts and sightings in the area she patrols. Wildlife officials and others have had to dispatch 89 bears this year that have gotten into mischief. There have been nearly 5,000 incidents this year involving bears they had to respond to.

The answer now could be to fine \$1,000 for intentionally feeding bears. Tickets can be written for not securing your bear-proof trash can, or leaving a bird feeder out. I believe mostly likely this will need to be done. At these times we live in, we must be responsible and try not to invite bears to get into trouble. However, having said that I have to wonder what did the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Mismanagement Service expect would happen when they let the bear population nearly double in the last 10 years? With all of the "book learning" they have had it seems common sense has flown out the window! They sit back and point fingers at us saying it is all our fault. My family moved to Loghill in 1969. My mother, God rest her soul, kept three hummingbird feeders filled all summer long until she and Dad moved back to Montrose in 1999. We never had a bear on the porch - not one in 30 years! This summer I have chased two different bears off that same porch - one of them three times, and I don't have a bird feeder out.

It doesn't take a genius to do the math on this. An estimate of twice as many bears is going to cause more bear-human conflicts. I guess I don't understand how unelected bureaucrats get to decide what the proper bear population should be. The wildlife biologists are failing at their job for letting this get this far out of hand. Once again, I have to wonder if the over-population of predators has anything to do with the demise of our deer herd and the downward spiral of elk numbers in this area. I don't believe it is a coincidence. It is a cause and effect situation. Obviously the Colorado Parks and Wildlife Mismanagement Service has started to wake up. They are now selling bear tags to non-residents for \$100 instead of \$350. A little slow on the uptake as far as I can tell. Perhaps hearing from us heathens that haven't had "book learning" would help the poor rascals.

C'mon folks, give them a call and holler a little. If enough of us do it, they may catch on! (970) 252-6000.

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Modern today, ancient tomorrow

Throughout history man has made advances. Each period of time, during its own time, has been considered the modern age. But with the passing years and centuries, what was modern becomes ancient. We consider ourselves modern now, but others to follow will consider us ancient.

Throughout all of this has been the fisherman. Not much has really changed for the fisherman. In a relative sense, compared to the dramatic inventions of the industrial revolution such as the airplane or the telephone, the fisherman still fishes much the same way as before. Fishing in ancient times was mostly for subsistence and livelihood. The recreational fishing of today is a relatively new aspect of fishing. But that is not to say there have not been advances.

Witness such new materials for rods such as fiberglass and graphite. Fishing

lines are now made of synthetics of different sorts. We have clothes and boots made of materials designed to withstand the weather. Waders allow us to get in the water without getting wet. Lures and flies are constructed of some man-made material. The list goes on.

But within the last decades, a very different invention is affecting the fisherman. This invention is a piece of equipment. But it is not equipment in the conventional sense of a rod or a reel. This invention is used to help catch fish. But it is not used directly in the catching of fish. Actually, it may be used very far from the water.

Have you guessed a computer? While certainly not a piece of equipment that is necessary to the catching of fish, computers are nonetheless a piece

See TOMORROW page 8



Tips from the Posse

By Mark Rackay



Outdoors

By Joel L. Evans