



# The Great SKUNK HUNT

**B**ack in my high school and college days I spent my summers working at Raven Knob Scout Camp in the mountains of northwestern North Carolina. During my tenure on camp staff I spent my first four summers in the "Ecology Conservation Area." A part of our staff's job while working at the nature lodge was to maintain live displays of various representative species of wildlife common to the area. If it crawled, swam, climbed, or flew, I was after it! All of the camp staff had one night off each week and it was on one of these nights that my buddy Greg and I decided to

drive up on Fisher's Peak and try to catch some rattlesnakes. On the way we stopped at a local diner and had a fella walk up to us in the parking lot and ask where we were heading. We told him that we were headed up on Fisher's Peak to hunt rattlesnakes. He replied by saying, "Heck fellas, my name's Loyal Shoeler, and I'd like to go along with ya'll up there." I said, "Hop in" and shortly thereafter we were headed up the mountain!

Our rattlesnake hunting was unproductive that evening and

as dark was settling in we started back down the old Forest Service road that led out to the Blue Ridge Parkway. About halfway down the mountain Loyal hollered, "There's a #@%&\* polecat, let's kill it!" I hollered back, "No let's catch it!" And the chase was on!

The skunk took off running right down the middle of the logging road as hard as it could go and

Illustration: Dave Aikins

The positive, the negative and the truly  
memorable encounters from one PCO's  
30+ years as a skunk hunter.

by R. Scott McNeely

## WILDLIFE CONTROL



we fell in right behind it going as fast as my old International Scout could manage in low range four wheel drive!

As we closed the distance that separated us from the skunk it cut across the road, hopped down in the side ditch, and then disappeared in a culvert that went under the road. We slid to a stop and dove out in pursuit with Greg and Loyal guarding one end of the culvert and me on the other. As I peered into the black opening of the culvert, rocks started bouncing through, as our newly acquired friend attempted to flush the skunk out to me. All at once there it was, peering out, right in front of me! Having absolutely no plan on how to catch this thing, I proceeded to push it back into the culvert with a snake hook. The skunk then took off heading back in Greg and Loyal's direction. I yelled, "He's headed your way!" I then grabbed a pair of snake tongs and a cloth snake bag from the truck, and took up position alongside of Loyal and Greg.

Loyal shouted, "Here he comes," grabbed the snake tongs and made a lunge for the skunk. He then proceeded to pull

the critter out from inside the culvert by its back leg. Along about the time that I noticed how wide the white stripe was on this particular skunk I also saw a misty looking fog coming right at us that was slightly illuminated by the headlights of my truck. For the next few moments I was blinded, coughing and gagging. Unwavered by this minor setback Loyal held on to the skunk, I slowly regained my ability to see, and the three of us were able to get the skunk stuffed into the snake bag.

We dropped Loyal off back at the diner and Greg and I headed the ol' International back towards camp. As we drove along Greg held the snake bag with the skunk out the window and we discussed how getting sprayed by a skunk wasn't really all that bad. Once we arrived back at camp our fellow staff members had a differing opinion on the severity of the skunk smell. This resulted in Greg and I spending a considerable amount of time that evening washing off with canned tomatoes that were "borrowed" from the dining hall.

Having experienced a multitude of both positive and negative skunk encounters and adventures during the past 30 years since this episode, I'd like to share some information in this article pertaining to urban skunk management that may contribute to your success in dealing with this group of animals.

### SPECIES, BIOLOGY & DISTRIBUTION.

In North America there are several species of skunks that belong to the family group *Mustelidae*. This family group is characterized by the scent glands present on these animals. Closely related North American species include weasels, mink, martins, fishers, otters and wolverines. All of my experiences dealing with skunk management have been limited to striped and spotted skunks.

Skunks are largely nocturnal animals, and they have an excellent ability to dig and burrow. They are poor climbers, have relatively poor eyesight and possess an excellent sense of smell. Adult female skunks normally give birth to four to eight young in the spring. Typically the young will

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stay in the den site until they are about six weeks old. At this time they will begin to accompany their mother during her nightly foraging activities. Also, it is common for humans to first become aware of the fact that there are skunks in the immediate area at this time.

Skunks are often considered opportunistic predators, feeding on a wide variety of insect life as well as a variety of ground-dwelling animals and eggs and the young of ground-nesting birds. Because of scarab beetle larvae (the developing young of June, May and Japanese beetles in North Carolina), damage to turf is common due to skunks digging "grubs" at certain times of the year.

Conflicts often occur when skunks decide to take up residence in close proximity to humans. Due to their nocturnal nature skunks may often live under homes, low decks, and utility buildings, with their presence going undetected. Contrary to popular belief skunks have no or very little odor unless they are disturbed and "spray."

Release of odor is normally associated with a defense reaction by the skunk when it feels threatened and, at times, during the mating season which usually occurs around February in our part of the country.

**MANAGEMENT CONCERNS.** Requests for skunk removal normally occur when humans encounter skunk odor, actually

see skunks foraging or denning on their property, experience turf damage, have destruction of eggs and poultry, or are concerned with the potential of skunks carrying the rabies virus.

**On-site removal.** On occasion skunks will find their way into buildings through open doorways and pet doors. They even have been brought into buildings on stacks of pallets. There are several points that you should always keep in mind when attempting to remove a skunk from a structure without causing it to spray.

One of the first things to always remember is to move slowly. I like to talk calmly to the skunk and watch to see how it reacts to my presence. Oftentimes you

## Skunk Case Studies

*A look at several memorable skunk calls I've experienced in the past 30+ years.*

BY R. SCOTT MCNEELY

### MY CHILDREN WERE SENT HOME FROM SCHOOL TODAY.

In this particular situation a call came into the office from a very distraught mother who had just picked up her children from school. It seems that there was a skunk in their yard the evening before and their dogs had chased it into the crawspace of their home. Apparently the skunk had sprayed at least several times and the odor had come up into the living area of the house and "mildly scented" about everything in the home. Once a person contacts skunk odor it seems that the human nose kind of "shuts down" and becomes much less sensitive to the presence of the odor. Unfortunately, folks who have not had this prolonged exposure to the odor will normally be aware of "a skunk smell" at very low levels of concentration.

At this home we used several "odor neutralizing" products to treat both the living area and crawspace of the home. In the crawspace we used a B&G electric fogger set on a heavy application rate and "misted" the crawspace area with odor neutralizer.

### THE GUARDS ARE AFRAID TO MAKE THEIR ROUNDS.

The call came into our office that a family of skunks had apparently taken up residence adjacent to a large commercial building where the guard service had to check the exterior perimeter several times each evening. It seems that around dusk for the past week or two there was a mother skunk with four or five young skunks foraging around one particular area. In this particular case an on-site inspection revealed a den dug next to the building. I placed an old sock filled with moth flakes down the hole and the skunk family relocated. Prior to filling the hole I "plugged" the hole with a crumpled up newspaper to make sure that the skunks were not using the den. Upon my return the next day I found that the paper was undisturbed and the hole was filled.

### IF YOU DON'T COME TODAY WE WON'T HAVE CHURCH TOMORROW.

One Saturday I received a call from a church that had an urgent request: "We have a family of skunks trapped in a window well of the church. We're afraid that they will spray and we don't think we'll be able to have church tomorrow unless you come out to catch them." As I drove into the church parking lot an hour later I was greeted by several anxious church members. I

was promptly shown the window well that contained the skunks and then taken inside to view them from a window in a downstairs Sunday school classroom. Fortunately I had a 1-by-8-inch board on the truck and some hardware cloth. I cut a strip of hardware cloth and tacked it on the board. I did this because skunks are not very agile climbers. I gently slid the board down into the window well and within a few minutes the mother skunk came up the board. It appeared that the young weren't quite big enough to come up the board so I took a pair of "cat grabbers" and eased them out. The mother skunk was on high alert hiding under an exterior air-handling duct and I was able to complete this task of removing the young without getting sprayed by taking my time and easing the young out. I then covered the window well with hardware cloth to the relief of several onlooking church members.

### THERE'S A SKUNK IN THE TRAILER!

Several years ago I received a call from a soft drink bottling company that had received a load of pallets from a supplier. The forklift operator was just about finished unloading when he spotted a skunk peering out from beneath the last stack of pallets in the back of the trailer. Needless to say that forklift operator had no intention of going back in after that last stack of pallets until his new acquaintance was out of there!

When we arrived on site I was surprised to find that there was no odor coming from the trailer and that the skunk had not sprayed even with all of the activity from moving the stacks of pallets. After a brief appraisal of the situation I decided to place a large covered cage trap in the back next to the last remaining stack of pallets. After easing in and getting this trap in place I slipped out and got an extension pole from the truck. I used the pole to slowly push the skunk out from under the pallets. The skunk was a little upset but really appeared to be looking for a way out. Once he spotted the dark opening of the covered trap he headed right in. Once captured in the trap, we gave him a few minutes to calm down. I then eased back in and took him to the truck without any further incidence. According to Rob Erickson in his book "Innovative Skunk Control," he states that a water pistol can be used to spray water behind a skunk to "move it in a desired direction". (Something that I'm sure I'll try when the opportunity presents itself.)

can place a covered cage trap along a wall near the skunk and take an extension pole to urge it to move. The skunk will go into the covered trap seeking cover and can then be removed. In his recently published book, "Innovative Skunk Control," Rob Erickson suggests using a water gun to spray behind the skunk to get it to move towards a trap that has been placed along a wall. I also

have used "cat grabbers" to lift skunks out of window wells. Another technique for getting skunks out of window wells when property owners do not want the skunks harmed is to place a board with a strip of hardware cloth stapled to the board down at an angle into the window well. Unlike raccoons, skunks are not good climbers and need the hardware cloth on the board to give

them enough traction to climb out.

**Trapping.** At times skunks can be fairly easy to trap depending on availability of food resources as well as trap selection, trap placement, and attractants that are used. Chicken, cat food, bacon and eggs can all be used effectively as baits for skunks. There are also several commercial baits and trailing scents that are available and can be effective. We recently found canned salmon and egg cat food has worked well for us in skunk trapping.

When skunks are under structures, a one-way door trap or cage trap can be used to block off openings. If traps are covered at the time they are set, then the likelihood of skunks spraying is greatly reduced. There are also several brands of cage traps that can be purchased with covers or are made of solid plastic that also discourage skunks from spraying.

I personally have not used plastic traps and have relied on covering cage traps.


We will often set a number of cage traps out at a site that are baited and uncovered.

One of the first things to remember is to move slowly. I like to talk calmly to the skunk and watch to see how it reacts to my presence.

We will then cover the trapped skunks prior to moving the traps. The key ingredient in avoiding the skunk spray is to watch the animal and see how it reacts to your presence and move slowly. When carrying a trapped skunk to your truck you should always move slowly and I like to carry the trap close to the ground. One of my fellow employees recently told another one of our technicians to carry a trapped skunk like you would a sleeping baby and chances are good you won't get sprayed.

**Lethal traps.** In North Carolina we are allowed to use body-gripping traps and have found that the 160 size Conibear trap is an excellent size trap for skunk removal. We will place these traps directly over den openings and, where conditions permit, use baited cubby sets. These are made using plastic newspaper mailboxes on the ground with the 160 Conibear type traps in front of the entrance. In situations where there is any potential concern with capture of "non-target" animals, these type of lethal trap sets should not be used.

**Shooting.** In certain situations where the use of firearms is permitted skunks can easily be shot. This can be especially effective on golf courses. In Rob Erickson's



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book "Innovative Skunk Control," Erickson discusses the merits of the metro gun barrel for use on shotguns. This barrel is a lightweight extension that will screw into the choke tube threads of a shotgun barrel. The use of the metro gun barrel extension combined with the subsonic shotgun loads that are now available can create an effective tool for harvesting skunks, according to Erickson.

**Repelling.** On occasion we will have skunks denning under a utility building or concrete slab where the property owners are concerned with the skunk's presence but they do not necessarily want them trapped and euthanized. In these situations we have found that by taking moth flakes we can often get the skunks to abandon the den site. We will take an old sock or bag and partially fill it with moth flakes. We will then take a stick or pole and push it down into the burrow. After a few days the burrow can be filled and watched for any renewed activity.

**Exclusion.** When skunks are under a utility building or low deck there may be an opportunity to generate additional revenue by installing wire to exclude future skunk activity. We will normally dig a trench about 6-12 inches deep and about 12 inches wide. We will then take either ¼- or ½-inch galvanized hardware cloth and attach it to the side of the deck and then run it down to the bottom of the trench and then bend it out like an L shape along the bottom of the trench. The trench is then filled in and if a skunk tries to burrow under in the future it will run into the wire "skirt" and fail to get under the structure.

**Euthanizing/Disposing.** In my home state of North Carolina we are not allowed to relocate skunks due to the potential spread of the rabies virus. Therefore, skunks must be released on site if we remove them from the interior of a structure or euthanized.

When euthanizing skunks we will use a gas chamber and carbon dioxide. The key to preventing skunks from spraying in a gas chamber is to slowly introduce the gas into the chamber. In some states euthanization using injection with a pole mounted syringe and euthanizing fluid is an approved and common procedure for dispatching skunks. At our office we also have a chest freezer for holding animals that have been euthanized prior to disposal. If you are required to euthanize animals in your state, having a freezer on site is well worth the money (especially during warm weather).

**CONCLUSION.** Understanding the biology and behavior of skunks is important to suc-

cessfully deal with solving your customer's concerns with this group of animals. You must also have the proper equipment, trapping devices and know how to properly use them. Close observation of a skunk's behavior when it is trapped and properly "reading" the animal's behavior can help greatly in avoiding getting sprayed. One final point in successfully working with

these animals is to always take your time. With proper preparation, offering skunk removal services can be an exciting and profitable addition to your pest control business. ❁

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