

Skunk in the Middle of the Road!

By Susan Heath

When I was a kid, Loudon Wainwright's song "Dead Skunk in the Middle of the Road" was a favorite on road trips. Even now, the song still pops in my head whenever I see a dead skunk, which is often on our Texas roads. So why is this such a common sight in these parts?

In Texas we have five species of skunks, which is more than any other state. Perhaps our state mammal should be the skunk! The most common species is the striped skunk and it is found throughout the state. They are black with two white stripes down their back. They are omnivorous which means they'll eat whatever they can get including insects, rodents, birds, fruits, and vegetable matter.

We also have eastern and western spotted skunks. These are black with white spots and they are quite agile and can climb trees unlike the other species. They are mostly carnivorous and eat mice and insects. The hog-nosed skunk lives on the Edwards Plateau and Trans-Pecos. It has one long white stripe that runs from the crown of its head to the tip of its tail and its entire back and tail is white. They eat mostly insects.

The final species is the hooded skunk, which lives in the Big Bend region. They are quite rare in Texas but very common in Mexico. Hooded skunks have two color patterns, one with a white back similar to the hog-nosed skunk and one with a black back with white stripes similar to the striped skunk. The hair on their neck and head is longer, creating the hooded look. They eat mice, insects and sometimes prickly pear. Some of these critters are quite beautiful.

But what about all the road kill? The most common time to see dead skunks on the road is February and March when the males are embarking on nighttime adventures to find mates. But throughout the year, sooner or later, a skunk just might not make it across the road and since they are nocturnal and mostly black, it is hard for drivers to see them.

We've all heard the stories about using tomato juice to remove skunk smell if you or your pet gets sprayed, but this is just not true! Skunk spray contains sulfur-based organic compounds called thiols which let off the immediate odor but also thioacetates, which remain dormant at first and are activated when they come into contact with water or humidity. This is what gives the skunk odor its staying power. Baking soda and grease cutting dish detergent are the best ways to remove the smell if you get sprayed. If your pet gets sprayed you can wash them in a mixture of hydrogen peroxide, detergent, and baking soda.

So now you know a lot more about skunks than you probably ever wanted to know. Oh, one more thing. Skunks are one of the leading carriers of rabies. Just another reason to love them! So beware the skunk but get a photo so you can tell what kind it is!

Photo by: Torli Roberts

Caption: The striped skunk is the most common species of skunk in Texas.