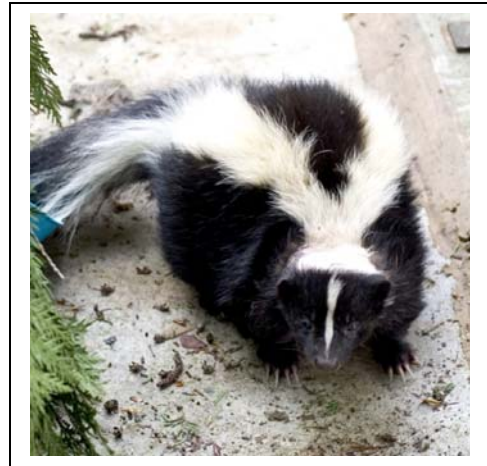


Urban Wildlife Issues
Wildlife Rescue column by Nicky Fried
as appearing in the *Burnaby NOW*

Animals and Cars

Don't you love the fact that we live in a world where everything has been studied to death and then some? There is a statistic for everything. Even, apparently, road kill.

Researchers estimate that there are close to seven million automobile accidents each year in North America between animals and vehicles. About one million vertebrates (skunks, squirrels, cats or opossums) are run over each day in North America (a rate of one every 11.5 seconds). This does not include road deaths to reptiles, amphibians, birds, and invertebrates.



On two occasions in the past week I have driven past these unnecessary deaths; in both instances the animals were skunks.

I'm not sure why skunks in my neighbourhood are putting themselves in harms way on the highways. I have this theory that their very able defenses make them a bit blasé and unlikely to consider the impact of a two thousand kilogram vehicle, hurtling along at 60 kilometres. *"Hey car – take a whiff of this."*

The explanation is likely a lot more prosaic; skunks are slow moving, cars are fast. Also skunks are nocturnal. They come out to forage just as we are getting into our cars and heading home from work when visibility is decreased.

Many of the skunks meeting untimely ends on the roads and elsewhere are the younger, less experienced animals. Skunks babies are born in April and May. At about eight weeks of age they are ready to head out of the den with mama and learn how to manage the big wide world. They will remain with her until the fall and often longer. And the early, learning days are very dangerous for them.

Right now WRA has seven young, orphaned skunks in its care. They are around eight weeks old. Not all of our baby skunks are in because of car collisions, a high proportion is the result of rapid urban expansion. New developments go up and the young skunk family gets sent out. Sometimes unscrupulous pest control companies will take mama, relocate her, and leave the babies to fend for themselves.

And yes, if case you were wondering, WRA is very smelly these days. The glands of the skunk become active at eight weeks of age or younger.

If a skunk has its tail down, you're safe. And if they do become anxious and decide to spray, you will get fair warning. The skunk is not aggressive and will always try and retreat from a human. An angry skunk will growl, hiss or stamp its front feet, or even walk a short distance on its front feet with its tail high in the air. Take the warning and remove yourself. The next step is for the skunk to hump its back and turn into a U-shape, so that both head and tail are facing the enemy. If you see this - run hard - because the spray can reach as far as six meters.

The musk of the skunk has seven different sulphide-containing "active ingredients" that not only smell dreadful, they also irritate. If the skunk gets you in the face, you're in for teary, burning eyes, possibly a short period of blindness and nausea.

Of course when you are teary eyed and coughing (and aware that no one is going to talk to you for at least two weeks), it's hard to remember that skunks are a really important part of the environment. They eat all sorts of unpleasant bugs, pests and rodents; farmers best friend. But of course you don't want to be thinking of animal ethics when you're breathing in skunk musk.

Here are some simple things you can do to ensure you do not have any encounters with the little black and white fellows:

- Lock up the garbage.
- Don't leave pet food outside.
- Stop up any areas that could allow skunks access to your home. Between April and August make sure there are no families in residence.
- Place moth-ball filled socks and cayenne pepper around the garden to discourage digging.
- Remove any debris or brush.
- Have a silhouette or blow up of a Great Horned Owl, the Skunk's only predator (hardy fellow).
- Pick your fruits.
- Restrict birdfeeding.
- Cover outside water sources.

Enjoy the remainder of your summer.

Nicky Fried writes for the Wildlife Rescue Association of BC located at 5216 Glencarin Drive on Burnaby Lake. The Wildlife Rescue Association cares for injured, orphaned and pollution damaged wildlife. If you have an animal in distress call the WRA at 604.526.7275.