Wildlife Express

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Skunks

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Striped Skunk Photo: CC-BY Bri_J at Flickr Creative Commons

Idaho Skunks

Most of us know skunks stink! There's a lot you might not know about this smelly little creature though! First off, the striped skunk's scientific name is *Mephitis mephitis* (mef-Eye-tis mef-Eye-tis) which means "bad odor." That makes sense! You'll find out more about how they use this adaptation in another article, called "What's is that smell?"

In Idaho we have two species of skunks. One is the striped skunk found all over the state in many types of habitats, including the city! The other is the western spotted skunk, which is a little less common is also found across most of the state.

Skunks are nocturnal, which means active at night. Finding food is what is on their minds! Skunks are omnivores, eating mostly insects but will eat about anything they can find. Mice, eggs, berries and plants are also part of a skunk's diet. Skunks use their amazing smell to find the foods they eat.

Skunks usually like to be alone, but mothers and babies den together. Baby skunks, called kits, are born in the spring. Kits are born nearly naked and can't see or hear well. They stay in the den until they are about six to seven weeks old. By this time, their scent sack is fully developed, so they can protect themselves. And now it's spring! Skunk moms have to teach all they know about being a skunk to the kits. It's a busy time! If you've ever seen a family of skunks, you won't forget the cuteness.

During the winter, skunks sometimes sleep together to stay warmer. Skunks usually stay in dens. Old holes made by badgers or rabbits make good skunk dens.

Skunks do not hibernate, but they do sleep through the snowiest and coldest parts of winter. Their bodies slow down to conserve energy.

When you smell a skunk in the neighborhood, remember somewhere there's a skunk trying to protect itself! Phew!

Patterns in Nature

There are just a few differences between the spotted skunk and the striped skunk. The most obvious has to do with their coats. You guessed it – stripes and spots!! Spotted skunks have a more complicated pattern of spots and broken lines, while striped skunks have two white strips from head to tail. Read on to learn how this helps them in the habitats where they live.

Patterns in nature can be hard to find or notice. Patterns are repeatable and regular designs. They can be very complex or very simple. The four most common visual patterns we see in nature are symmetry, spots and stripes, tessellations and spirals.

Symmetry

is when the plant or animal can be folded in half and mirror the other side. When you look at something that is symmetrical, it looks the same on both sides of a middle line. Butterfly wings, these are almost always symmetrical. Another example of symmetry is the leaves on a fern. Fern leaves grow out from a middle line or stem and are the same on either side of the stem. Symmetry on a butterfly allows them to camouflage and hide in with their environment.

Patterns in nature are very common and are also very useful. They can be used for camouflage, attraction, and organization. Get outside and notice patterns in nature, it's fun!

Spots and Stripes

are simple to identify, and these can also occur on animals or plants you might find in nature. Let's find out how this helps the skunks of Idaho. Striped skunks tend to eat in open areas. Their stripe is easily seen and lets us know that we should keep away. Spotted skunks, stick to dense vegetation areas where their spots help to camouflage them. Up close, spotted skunk still have the colors that give us warning. A bobcat has both stripes and spots on its coat! This allows for the bobcat to easily hide to do the jobs it needs to do.

Certain flowers also have spots and stripes. These patterns on the flower pedals help attract bees to the nectar.

Tessellations

are patterns that repeat themselves over and over again. An example of this is the cells of a honeycomb and scales of a fish. In math, tessellations can be used to find distance. Once you know the size or length of one of the cells, you can find the whole distance or area because each cell is the same. In nature, tessellations are a great example of organization. The cells are perfectly alike and arranged so that there are no gaps or overlaps.

Spirals

The last most common pattern is spirals. Spirals start at a center point and then loop around and around. Some examples include the scales of a pinecone, some seashells, and a bighorn sheep horn.

Patterns in Nature

SYMMETRY



SPOTS / STRIPES



TESSELLATIONS

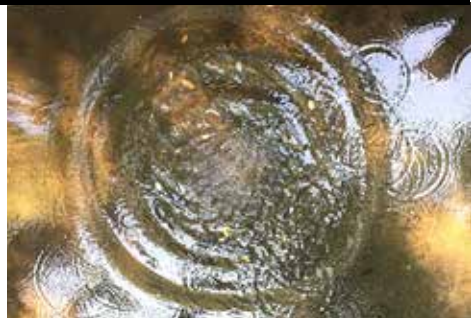


SPIRALS



RADIALS





What is that smell?

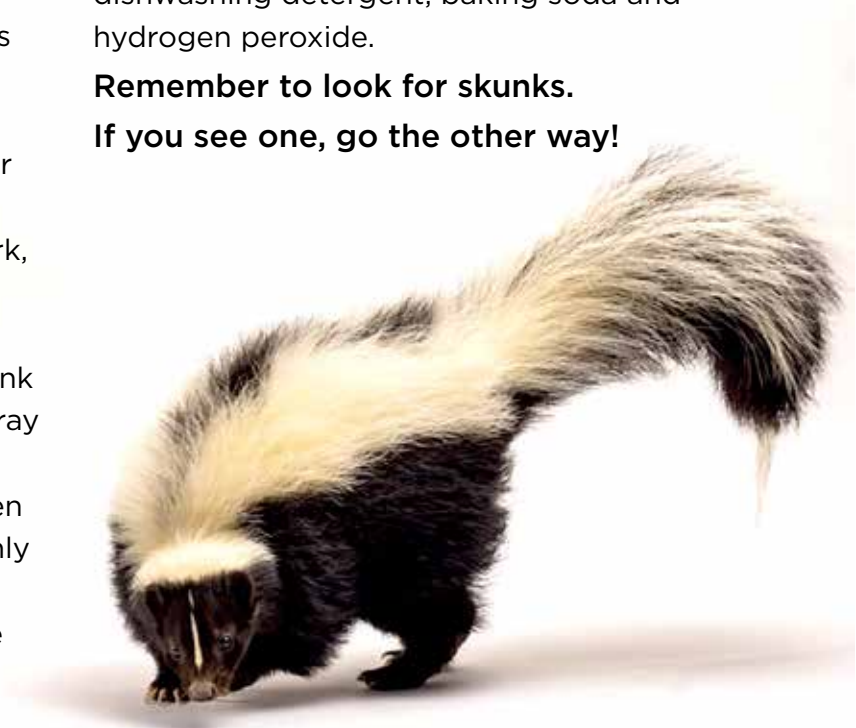
The stinky smell of a skunk comes from two glands in its back end. The glands are about the size of a grape and hold three teaspoons of smelly stuff. This is enough for five to six sprays. It takes one week to make just two teaspoons of fluid!

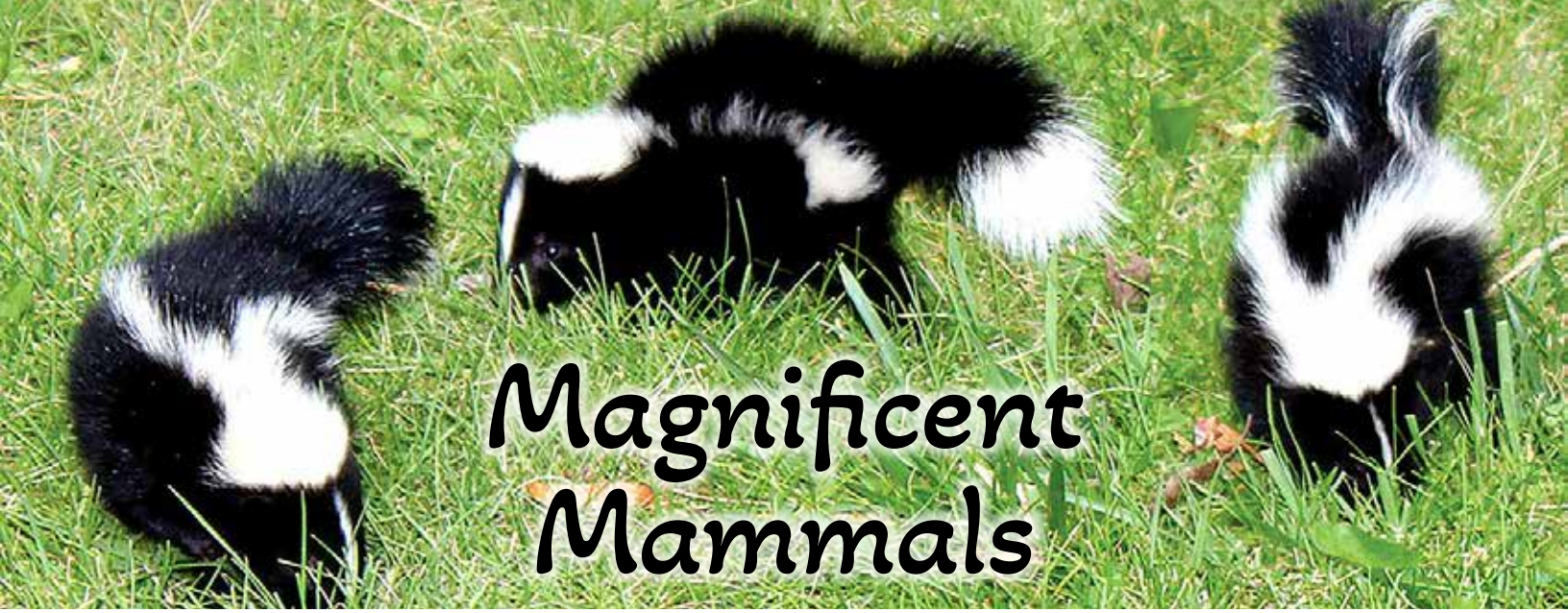
Skunks don't go around spraying everything in sight they don't like. Skunks only use their spray as a last resort. If a skunk used up all its spray and a bobcat came along, that skunk might lose its life. They will try and get away first. Then they give a warning by raising their tail. Skunks raise their tails. They stomp their feet. They click their teeth. If this doesn't work, they aim their tails at the predator and bend their bodies in the shape of a "u". That way they can see where they're spraying. The skunk squeezes muscles around the glands. The spray shoots out of the skunk like water out of a bath toy. The stinky spray can fly ten to fifteen feet. That's a big wallop for an animal that only weighs between four to nine pounds! Skunk spray not only smells bad, but also stings the eyes and nose of a predator. A direct hit in the eyes can make an animal blind, but only for a short time. Tears will wash the spray out of the eyes.

If you get sprayed, toss your clothes in the trash can. Getting the smell out of clothing is hard. Wash your skin with a mixture of liquid dishwashing detergent, baking soda and hydrogen peroxide.

Remember to look for skunks.

If you see one, go the other way!





Magnificent Mammals

One thing we have in common with a skunk is that we both are mammals. What does that mean? First, we both have hair. Secondly, we are both warm-blooded. This means that our body temperature stays the same all the time. Some animals, like reptiles, are cold-blooded. Their body temperatures change with their surroundings.

Mammals also give birth to live young and feed newborns milk. Drinking mother's milk is one thing that sets mammals apart from other animals. It is full of vitamins, minerals and lots of fat. Fat helps the bodies and brains of the babies grow. It could be one reason why mammals have the some of the largest and most developed brains.

Aren't you glad you're a mammal? We have a lot more in common with skunks than maybe you thought! Remember, we all need food, water, shelter and space, too!

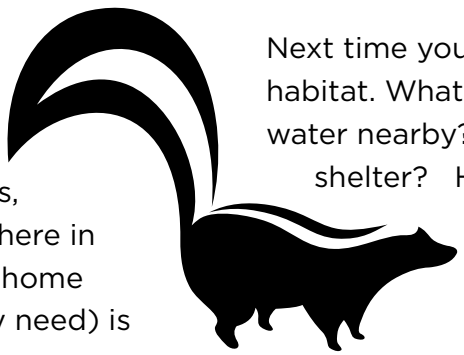
Here are some more mammal facts that you may not know:

- There are about 1000 different kinds of mammals in Idaho. The ability to keep bodies at one temperature allows mammals to live in many different habitats.
- The largest Idaho mammal is the moose. It weighs in around 2300 pounds!
- The smallest Idaho mammal is pygmy shrew. They weigh about the same as a pencil.
- A fully grown skunk weighs up to 13 pounds.
- Some mammals live their entire lives in water (blue whales). Some build their homes in water! (beavers)
- Two mammals lay eggs, the duck billed platypus and the echidna (a-KID-na). They are not found in Idaho!

HOME SWEET HOME

An animal's home is called its habitat. A habitat contains four things: food, water, shelter and space. If one part is missing, an animal will have difficulty surviving. It is easy to see how important food, water and shelter are to an animal. You must eat. A big glass of ice water sure hits the spot on a hot summer day. You wouldn't want to stand outside during a thunderstorm. The space part of habitat is just as important as food, water or shelter.

Skunks live in a variety of habitats including deserts, forests, cities and mountains, most anywhere in North and South America. Their home range, (the amount of space they need) is anywhere from half a mile to up to five miles for male skunks during breeding season.



Animals need enough space to find the things they need without having to fight for them. When animals must fight over food or shelter, they use important energy. Animals can also make each other sick if too many are in an area by passing diseases or viruses.

Next time you see an animal, think about its habitat. What does the animal eat? Is there water nearby? Is there a bush, hole or cave for shelter? Habitat loss is one of the biggest threats to wildlife.

Name GAME

Mountain lion
Puma concolor

Everything has a name. You have a first name and a last name. Did you know that animals and plants have two names, too? They have a common name and a scientific name. The scientific name is usually in Greek or Latin and is made up of two words. The first word is the genus (JEE-nus) name. The second part is called the species name. Scientific names are given by the scientists who study animals. The first part of a scientific name tells us what genus an animal or plant is in. Plants or animals with the same genus name are closely related. They have many things in common with each other. Think of them like cousins.

The species part of the scientific name tells us something specific and unique about the plant or animal. Plants and animals can be given their scientific names by the person that first discovered them and wrote about them. The white-tailed jackrabbit's scientific name is *Lepus townsendii*. It was named after J.K. Townsend, the person that first collected white-tailed jackrabbits. Animals and plants can also be named for some special features they have. The striped skunk's scientific name is *Mephitis mephitis.* We told you before this means "bad odor, bad odor." No news here!

The mountain lion's scientific name is *Puma concolor*. Concolor means one color. Mountain lions don't have any spots on their bodies when they are fully grown. Other wild cats in Idaho, bobcats and lynx, do have spots or markings on their bodies when they are fully grown.

The common name is the name most people use when talking about the animal. Common names sometimes change from location to location. There are many names for a mountain lion. Which do you use and know? Cougar? Puma? Catamount?

Scientific names can tell us a lot about animals and plants. Next time you see a scientific name, do a little research and find out what the name means. You might be surprised by what you find out!

Check out the graphic on the next page that shows how skunks are classified.

White-tailed jackrabbit
Lepus townsendii

ANIMAL CLASSIFICATION

Spotted Skunk		Striped Skunk
DOMAIN *Eukarya*		DOMAIN *Eukarya*
KINGDOM *Animalia*		KINGDOM *Animalia*
PHYLUM *Chordata*		PHYLUM *Chordata*
CLASS *Mammalia*		CLASS *Mammalia*
ORDER *Carnivora*		ORDER *Carnivora*
FAMILY *Mephitidae*		FAMILY *Mephitidae*
GENUS *Spilogale*		GENUS *Mephitis*
SPECIES *Gracilis*		SPECIES *Mephitis*
Spilogale gracilis		***Mephitis mephitis***

WHAT'S YOUR Niche?

The word "niche" (NICH) might be new to you. To help you understand it, think of the town where you live. People in your community have jobs that make it a good place to live. Doctors keep you healthy. Teachers help you learn, and people make food for you to eat. We all have our specialties.

Animals, plants and other organisms also have jobs and roles to play where they live. This role is called a niche. An animal's niche includes such things as where and how the animal gathers food and its link in the food chain. Every living thing has important jobs and roles to help the ecosystem to function. If one of these critters is missing, the ecosystem may be unhealthy.

At times, it may be hard to see what an animal's niche is. What about skunks? They just seem like stinky animals that may cause farmers problems. Well, the smelly skunk has an important role in nature. Skunks eat A LOT of insects. Many of the insects that skunks eat, such as grasshoppers, beetles and moth larvae, can cause problems for farmer's crops. Skunks help farmers by eating crop pests. The small bit of grass or soil they dig up looking for food is a small price to pay for all the insects they eat.

What's your niche?

Do you have an important job or role to play in your family or school?

Striped Skunk: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

FAMILY Ties

All members of the weasel family have something in common. They all smell. Some of them down right stink! Badgers, wolverines, weasels and otters are all members of this family. Members of the weasel family are called mustelids (mu-STELL-ids). All mustelids have glands that make musk. Musk is an oily fluid that has a strong scent. Musk may be used for protection or to attract mates. It is also used to mark territories or homes.

Do you think skunks would be in this family? It sure seems that they would be in the smelly mustelid family. At one time, scientists did put them in this family. In science, categories can change as scientists study and learn more. It doesn't mean that they were wrong before, but they just found out more! In science, is there is always something new to learn.

One thing scientists are able to do more easily is study the DNA of an animal. DNA is what makes animals and plants what they are. Members of families share some of the same DNA. When scientists looked at the DNA of skunks, they found that skunks had DNA that was different from other members of the mustelid family. Skunks really shouldn't have been in that family. Scientists realized that skunks should be moved into their own group. Skunks and animals called stink badgers are now in their own family named Mephitidae (mef-i-ti-DAY-ee). It won't change how we think about skunks, but it will help scientists with specific classification. Now that you know, can you tell us what animal in the group of pictures doesn't belong?

WHICH ANIMAL DOESN'T BELONG IN THIS GROUP?

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Photo: CC-BY Idaho Fish and Game

Photo: CC-BY Full Moon Images at Flickr Creative Commons

Photo: CC-BY USFS Public Domain at Flickr Creative Commons

Poison Dart Frog Photo: CC-BY Steve Priest at Flickr Creative Commons

Warning Colors

What do the white and black stripes on a skunk mean? They mean stay back! Some animals want to blend in with their surroundings and hide for protection, but other animals want to stand out. They want to be noticed. Many animals have colors that are a warning to leave them alone. Many insects use colors to tell predators they are not good to eat. Monarch butterflies are orange and black. The milkweed longhorn beetle is red with small black dots. Both insects eat milkweed. Milkweed is poisonous to most animals. When the monarch and beetle eat the milkweed plant, they hold the poison in their bodies. This makes them poisonous. The bright orange and red colors on these insects tell animals "Don't eat me or you will be sorry!"

Poison dart frogs are the most colorful frogs on Earth. They can be red, blue or yellow. The mucus that keeps the frogs' skin moist has a powerful poison in it. These little frogs could even kill a person that touches them. Coral snakes are reptiles that have warning colors. They have stripes in a pattern of red, yellow and black. This small snake uses venom to kill its prey. Their venom is very toxic and can kill large animals, including people. Their bright colors are easy to see and give animals a chance to move away and avoid the snake. A milk snakes is a snake that looks very similar. They do not have the deadly venom of a coral snake. The only way to tell them apart is to look at the pattern the colors make on the snakes. Milk snakes have stripes of yellow and red separated by a black stripe. In coral snakes, the red and yellow touch each other. The patterns are a bit different, but would you look closely enough to see the differences? Or would you just walk away quickly when you saw red, yellow and black on a snake?

Colors on animals aren't there just to make the animals look pretty. Bright colors could be there to tell us something. They may be a warning to leave the animal alone!

Longhorn Beetle on Milkweed Photo: CC-BY Tim Hoeflich at Flickr Creative Commons

BE OUTSIDE
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

Are you giving anyone a special valentine this month? It's fun to make valentines to send to friends or give to family. With spring on the way, many animals will be giving "valentines" to each other, but their valentines are not made out of paper!

When you are exploring outside this winter and spring, look for animals and the "valentines" they give to each other. Great horned owls are some of the earliest nesting birds in North America. They nest in late January and February. This is the time when great horned owls show they are committed to each other. During mating season, male and female great horned owls hoot back and forth to each other. They also bow and rub bills. Some animals will give food to each other. Barn owls offer their mates tasty mice as a gift. Before the female ever starts to lay her eggs, the male will bring her food. This may be his way of showing her that he is a good hunter. While the female barn owl sits on her eggs, the male will need to bring her food. He will also need to help bring food to the owlets.

Sometimes animals try to impress their cuties by their actions. This is how cottontail rabbits impress their mates. They jump over each other. They may also do something that is a bit gross; they often urinate when they jump, spraying their potential mate with pee! You may think that is yucky, but cottontails don't seem to mind.

Male shrews get a bit chubby to impress female shrews. Some male shrews double their weight before breeding season. Could you imagine eating so much food that you doubled your weight in just a few weeks or months? You would have to eat tons of food! Female shrews must like their special guys on the plump side.

Some animals offer their mates valentines of dancing and singing. Male crows can put on quite a display. They dance, bow and strut with their wings and tail feathers spread out. While dancing, crows sing a song that is a bit like a rattle. Animals may not give real valentines to their sweeties, but they offer other gifts to show they like each other.

Be sure to look for these animal "valentines" outside this winter and spring.

Great Horned Owls: CC-BY Behrouz Far at Flickr Creative Commons, Cottontail Rabbits: CC-BY Joellen Wright at Flickr Creative Commons

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WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

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