

Acton WildAware
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By Paula Goodwin

Opossums and Striped Skunks - Nocturnal Wildlife Neighbors

Opossums are shy, nocturnal mammals. Known as Virginia Opossums, they are gentle creatures, moving slowly through the nighttime hours using their keen sense of smell and sensitive hearing. The opossums' omnivorous diet, ability to climb trees and swim allow it to travel through and adapt to a variety of habitats. Opossums live in a home range of about 12 acres and will walk an average of two miles each night in search of food. Rather than digging their own shelters they move into abandoned woodchuck and badger burrows.

The Opossum is a North American marsupial, like kangaroos and koalas. At birth, the one-half inch long physically immature young pull themselves into the mother's pouch where they will live for two months before emerging and clinging to her fur until they are strong enough to move efficiently on their own. The joeys learn about finding food from watching their mother's foraging and hunting as they ride along. Fruits, worms, eggs, slugs, insects, snakes, rabbits and carrion are included in the opossum diet.

Opossums have 50 sharp, pointy teeth which serve them well both for eating and in defense when threatened by predators. Playing dead by rolling over with eyes and mouth open and slowing its heart rate is an effective strategy that the opossum can maintain for several minutes to several hours. The opossum life span is two to four years. Their prehensile, hairless tails are useful for feeling the area behind them, for securing a strong grip on tree branches and for carrying bunches of leaves into their tidily kept shelters. Opossums' hind feet are similar to a human hand, with a "thumb" that can close with a tight grip around branches and help it climb trees.

It is generally easy to discourage an opossum from denning under porches by placing items with strong human scent such as old sneakers and worn socks near the den. Since the young are carried by their mother there is less chance of helpless young opossums being abandoned. Very rarely, opossums will topple garbage cans to eat discarded food. It is helpful to tightly seal garbage cans and secure them with bungee cords.

The Striped Skunk prefers a mix of wooded areas, fields and brush within two miles of water, which makes Acton a favorable locale!

The breeding season for skunks is during February and March, with kits being born in April and May. The kits will stay in the den for 6-8 weeks before beginning to follow their mother, traveling behind her in a straight line while they learn from her how to find food. Skunks move slowly and cannot climb trees. They are near-sighted and tend to keep their noses to the ground as they forage for food, making them easily startled. It is generally an easygoing, tolerant mammal which will only spray its obnoxious smelling

musk when overwhelmingly threatened. Mass Wildlife recommends: “Remain calm when encountering a skunk! Should you encounter a skunk, speak softly and move away in order to give it room to leave. Once you back away, the skunk will no longer feel threatened and will move off. If it doesn’t, try clapping your hands and making some noise from a safe distance.”

Be aware of three warning displays the skunk presents before resorting to spraying:

1. The skunk stamps its front feet
2. The skunk raises its tail with the tip pointed downward
3. Final warning: The skunk raises its tail with the tip fanned out

If the warnings fail, the skunk then turns its body in a sideways U shape with head and tail facing the aggressor and sprays a stream 12 to 15 feet with accuracy.

Because of their slow gait as they travel along roadways, skunks and opossums are at risk for being hit by cars. While driving at night, please be WildAware and give them a chance to stay safe.

To learn more about Virginia Opossums and Striped Skunks:

The National Opossum Society: <http://www.opossum.org/>

MSPCA Living With Wildlife Program: www.LivingWithWildlife.org

Loudoun Wildlife Conservancy: <http://www.loudounwildlife.org/HHStripedSkunk.htm>

Mass Division of Fisheries and Wildlife:

<http://www.mass.gov/eea/docs/dfg/dfw/wildlife/wildlife-living/living-with-skunks.pdf>

Paula Goodwin is a member of the Acton Conservation Commission who introduced WildAware with Acton Natural Resource Assistant Bettina Abe. WildAware is a program sponsored by the Town of Acton Natural Resources Department that began in September and will continue through the summer of 2016. The purpose of WildAware is to educate the community about the existence and habits of wild creatures, and the goal is increased community awareness of shared habitats. For information, call 978-929-6634 or send email to nr@acton-ma.gov.