

LD
5655
A761
M123
MT-58
c.2

EXTENSION SERVICE, VIRGINIA POLYTECHNIC INSTITUTE
and the
FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE, U. S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
COOPERATING IN RODENT CONTROL.

V. P. I. LIBRARY
AUG 8 1969

BLACKSBURG, VA.

SUGGESTIONS FOR THE CONTROL OF SKUNKS

by

John C. Jones, Biologist, Fish and Wildlife Service

The striped skunk (genus Mephitis), which is widely distributed over the United States, and the smaller spotted skunk (genus Spilogale), the range of which is restricted largely to the more southern part of the country, are both members of the weasel family.

Skunks are mostly beneficial to man. They feed on insects and grubs to a large extent and are excellent mousers. In the cooler parts of their range their economic value alone, as producers of fine fur, entitles them to a large measure of protection. Occasionally, however, when they take up their abode too near human habitation or when they develop a taste for poultry, it becomes necessary to remove them. Individuals can be eliminated, however, without waging a general war on skunks.

HABITS OF SKUNKS

Skunks are chiefly nocturnal, coming out at night to seek their food, which consists of grubs, insects, small rodents, carrion, and such plant materials as soft fruits, berries, unripened corn, and mushrooms. They may at time take birds' eggs and fledglings, but since they do not ordinarily climb, their depredations are restricted to nests situated on or close to the ground. Despite their short legs and unhurried gait, skunks may travel considerable distances in their nightly forays after food.

Their strong plantigrade feet are equipped with claws well adapted for digging in soft soils in which their burrows are sometimes made. Generally, rather than dig an entirely new den, skunks choose a convenient hole and enlarge it. Frequently a cavity in a rockpile will serve as a den. Often skunks take up their abode under the flooring of a summer cottage, farmhouse, or outbuilding, where their presence may be a matter of concern, as well as unpleasantness, to the owner of the building.

NUISANCE AND DAMAGE

Where skunks are numerous, rural and suburban dwellers sometimes find them a nuisance. One of the chief causes of complaint against them is their tendency to den under the floors of houses, outhouses, garages,

and other buildings and in other places near human habitation. Frequently a den is occupied by a number of skunks, and the penetrating, nauseous odor emanating from such a place is highly obnoxious.

The charge is often made that skunks kill poultry and destroy eggs. As already mentioned, however, skunks are not good climbers and therefore are limited to poultry that roost on or near the ground and to eggs in nests situated near the ground. A skunk usually takes but a single bird at a time, but once it forms the habit, it may repeatedly visit the poultry yard. Such a guilty individual should be disposed of. Upon investigation, however, it will frequently be found that the real culprits are weasels or minks, or even rats, all of which are adept climbers and kill far more ruthlessly.

Their fondness of insects causes skunks to make depredations upon beehives, and beekeepers complain that the juicy larvae as well as the adults are devoured.

Skunks occasionally dig holes in lawns and meadows to which they are attracted by heavy infestations of cutworms and other grubs. As such areas are thus made rough and unsightly, the owners object, but it is probably that the skunks are really rendering them a valuable service in ridding the ground of the injurious insects.

Inexperienced dogs seldom can resist the temptation to investigate the trail of a skunk, but an encounter usually ends disastrously for the dog, it becoming well scented.

SIGNS OF THE PRESENCE OF SKUNKS.

Shallow pits 1 or 2 inches deep and 3 or 4 inches across, dug in search of food, indicate the presence of skunks. These pits are particularly conspicuous late in fall when frosts have laid the vegetation low. Droppings of skunks, which are usually distinguishable from those of most other animals of similar size because they consist largely of chitinous insect coverings and the indigested seeds of berries, are found along trails and near denning places. Inhabited burrows are readily discernible; they are free of spider webs and often emit the distinctive skunk odor. A burrow that is in use shows evidence of the rubbing of the animal's body against the entrance as it passes in and out. Skunks hairs left clinging to small roots or other projections and tracks of the animal along trails and in the soft soil around the burrows may also frequently be seen.

PREVENTION CONTROL

Because of their value, rather than destroy skunks needlessly, they should be prevented from establishing themselves in places where they will become a nuisance. If they are numerous, it is well to seal all openings in the foundations of garages, porches, and outbuildings through which any small mammal might enter. Skunks are not efficient burrowers; hence they can often be discouraged from denning and be

driven away be making den sites difficult to find.

When skunks harbor under buildings, they can usually be driven away with the use of repellents. Naphthalene flakes of moth balls are sometimes satisfactory for this purpose. About a pound of the flakes or of the moth balls should be placed in the den and scattered about it. Household ammonia also is suggested as a repellent, but a large quantity is required and it does not last long. After the skunks have departed, all openings through which the animals can gain entrance should be closed with some suitable material, as cement, boards, or wire netting.

The most effective way to control skunks that enter poultry houses is to close all doors and other openings each night. Skunk control on the open chicken range is possible through proper fencing. Surround the range with a 3-foot wire-netting fence, 2 feet of which should be above and 1 foot below the surface. Bend outwardly at right angles 6 inches of the part below the surface and bury 6 inches deep. When the skunk starts digging down along the vertical wire fence, it will become discouraged when it strikes the horizontal flange and stop.

Skunks damaging lawns can be indirectly controlled by ridding the lawn of grubs and other insects. It is suggested that interested persons write to the State Agricultural Experiment Station for publications or advice on this subject.

CONTROL BY TRAPPING

Skunks can be caught with No. 1 or No. 1-1/2 traps set at the entrance to their dens. These animals are frequently taken in unbaited traps, but better success will be attained if the head of a fowl or a dead mouse is used as bait or if a fetid scent is used to attract them. The stake to which the trap is fastened should be placed the full length of the chain from the den entrance; this enables the trapper to dispatch his catch with as little unpleasantness as possible. When a den is used by more than one animal, time may be saved by setting several traps near the entrance. Skunks may be caught in any simple trail-set in a locality frequented by them, particularly if bait or scent is used. They are often caught in baited traps set for foxes.

In places where ejection of their scent fluid would be objectionable, skunks may be taken in baited box traps or wire cage traps and transferred to a distance and released or drowned without being removed from the trap. A few tablespoonfuls of carbon bisulphide or chloroform poured through a hole in a tight box trap will dispatch the animal painlessly and usually without a discharge of scent.

When skunks must be removed from an area, they should preferably be trapped at a season when the fur is prime or nearly so. Properly cared for, the skins usually bring a fair price. A slit should be made down the inner surface of the legs and around the vent to permit peeling the skin over the head, flesh side cut. Stretch the skin moderately and carefully remove all fat and shreds of flesh; then cure it in a cool, dry place.

PROTECTIVE LAWS

Most states now protect skunks by law during the greater part of the year but usually permit an open season in fall. If, however, skunks prove to be detrimental or injurious to property, the owner or occupant can usually obtain a permit from the State to control them. Persons wishing to take skunks should familiarize themselves with local and State ordinances, information concerning which may be obtained from your local game warden.

Agricultural Extension Service, V.P.I. Blacksburg, Virginia
An Educational Service of the Virginia Polytechnic Institute in
Cooperation with the United States Department of Agriculture and
County Governments.

MT-58

dm

June 9, 1960