

# Conservation Corner

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Last week, as I swerved around a road-killed skunk, I realized skunks have yet to amble across Conservation Corner. As skunks emerge from their winter dens, spring is a good time to take a closer look, albeit from a safe distance, at this often maligned and misunderstood mammal.



Iowa is home to two types of skunk – spotted and striped. Spotted skunks, also known as civet or pole cats, are smaller and more slender than their striped cousins and are

now classified as endangered here in Iowa. With the loss of small farms, open cribs, and rodents, spotted skunks have all but disappeared from our farms and countryside. On the other hand, striped skunks have easily adapted to the changing farm scene as well as city life.

Both skunks are omnivores whose diets change with the seasons. Favorite spring and summer foods include insects and their larvae, fall finds them fattening up on fruits and berries, and winter is spent sleeping through cold spells and foraging for mice and rats on mild days.

Skunks are primarily nocturnal, but they may be seen earlier in the day or evening, especially in the spring and fall months. This is not necessarily an indication of rabies or cause for alarm. If the skunk appears to be healthy and minding its own business, do not disturb it and maintain a respectable distance.

The reason for staying back, of course, is that both skunks release an oily, sulfurous spray in self-defense. Spotted skunks may perform a handstand as a warning signal while striped skunks arch their backs and stamp their front feet before spraying. Their spray contains the volatile chemical compounds thiols and thioacetates that are both rich in sulfur. Sulfur atoms, the same element in rotten eggs, have very stable bonds with other atoms, which makes the smell difficult to remove. An effective treatment must chemically grab onto the sulfur molecules so they can be washed away while changing the thiols into less odorous compounds.

The following recipe works well: In an open container, mix together  $\frac{1}{4}$  cup baking soda, a fresh 1 quart bottle of 3 percent hydrogen peroxide, and 1-2 teaspoons of liquid dish detergent. Use right away. Thoroughly work the mixture into the fur, hair, or skin, avoiding the eyes and mouth. Leave on for five minutes and then rinse with fresh water. Repeat if necessary.

In closing, I'd like to remind everyone that Friday, April 22, is Earth Day, a good day to do something special for our home planet. If you live in Pocahontas, you're invited to join the Hometown Pride folks for several Earth Day projects. They will meet at 9:00 a.m. Friday morning at the Princess Park (rain date is April 25). Please bring landscaping tools, work gloves, and a friend! Contact [pokyed@evertek.net](mailto:pokyed@evertek.net) for more info.

Wherever you live, I trust Earth Day will find you celebrating and conserving our natural heritage, even if it includes washing skunk smell off your family pet!