

Wildlife Express!

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Snazzy Skunks



photo by Roy Kinner, IDFG





photo by Joan London

Let's Look At...

Striped Skunk

There's no way around it – skunks stink! The skunk's scientific name is *Mephitis mephitis* (mef-I-tis mef-I-tis) which means bad odor. How fitting!

Skunks are found all across Idaho. The only places they don't seem to like are thick forests, very dry lands and high mountains. Skunks are most active at night. During the day, they usually stay in dens. Old holes made by badgers or rabbits make good skunk dens.

Skunks usually like to be alone, but you will find mothers and babies together. Baby skunks are called kits. Kits are born nearly naked, blind and deaf. They stay in the den until they are about six to seven weeks old. By this time, their scent is fully developed, so they can protect themselves.

You may also find skunks sleeping together during the winter. This helps them stay warmer. Skunks do not hibernate, but they do sleep through the snowiest and coldest parts of winter.

Skunks eat mostly insects, but they are not picky eaters. Mice, eggs, berries and plants are also part of a skunk's diet.

The nasty 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! Don't think skunks go around spraying everything in sight they don't like. If a skunk used up all of its spray and a bobcat came along, that skunk might lose its life.

Skunks only use their spray as a last resort. They will try and get away first. Then they give a warning. Skunks raise their tails, stomp their feet and 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 out 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. This will



Welcome Back!

Welcome back to another year of learning. You probably have noticed that *Wildlife Express* has a new look! We are excited about our new logo and hope that you like it, too.

The cover may look different, but the paper hasn't changed. We still have fun things to share about Idaho's wild animals and their habitats. Some animals we will be learning about are sculpin and Idaho's state bird, the mountain bluebird. Wonder what sculpin are? Well, you will have to wait until January to find out! Look for the mountain bluebird issue in March. We also will have some fun projects or activities for you to try in each issue.

If you missed last year's "Cutbow" contest, don't worry! We have another contest in the works that should be a lot of fun. Great prizes will also be awarded!

We want to hear from you! Do you have questions about Idaho animals you would like answered? Have a poem or drawing you would like to share? Send them to *Wildlife Express*. The address for *Wildlife Express* is on the back page. Who knows? Your question, poem or drawing might be featured in a future issue!

We hope you enjoy *Wildlife Express* this year. Have a great school year - study hard and keep reading about nature's wonders!



Magnificent Mammals

Skunks are mammals. Their bodies are covered with hair. They are warm-blooded, and they feed their young milk. Can you think of other animals that do this?

Worldwide there are about 4000 different kinds of mammals. They are found everywhere on Earth. The largest mammal is the blue whale. It can weigh up to 196 tons! One of the smallest mammals is the bumblebee bat. It weighs about as much as a penny. Shrews are also small; they weigh about the same as three paper clips.

Mammals are warm-blooded. The temperature inside their bodies stays about the same all the time. This allows mammals to live in a wide variety of places. Snakes are cold-blooded. Their body temperature is always the same as their surroundings. Humans have a body temperature that is usually about 98.6 degrees Fahrenheit. Are you warm-blooded or cold-blooded?

Many mammals live on land, but not all of them. Whales, porpoises and manatees spend their whole lives in water. After the young are born, the mother helps her babies to the top of the water to take their first breath. Seals, sea lions and walrus spend most of their time in the water, but they leave the water to breed, give birth and rest.

Some mammals lay eggs! Ever heard of a duck-billed platypus or echidna (a-KID-na)? These are mammals that don't give birth to live babies. The young hatch out of eggs, but they still drink their mothers' milk. Drinking mother's milk is one thing that sets mammals apart from other animals.

Mother's milk is the perfect food for a young mammal. It is full of vitamins, minerals and lots of fat. Fat helps the babies grow quickly. Seals and whales make milk that is half fat! That's 50 percent! Whole milk from cows that you may drink only has four-percent fat. Seals and whales need a layer of fat, called blubber, to insulate them from the cold ocean water. The high fat content of their mothers' milk help them build up a nice layer of blubber to keep warm.

Fat is also important to help mammals brains grow. Mammals have the largest, most developed brains compared to other kinds of animals. Aren't you glad you are a mammal?

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 not survive.

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. But the space part of habitat is just as important as food, water or shelter.

Animals need enough space to find the things they need without having to fight for them. When animals have to fight over food, they use important energy. Animals gathered together in small spaces can also make each other sick. Think of a student that has a cough. In the small space of a classroom, that student's germs quickly spread to other students who also get sick.

Next time you see an animal, think about its habitat. What is around that the animal might eat? Is there water nearby? Is there a bush, hole or cave for shelter? Does it seem like many other animals are around? Answering these questions will tell you a lot about the life and habitat of the animal you saw.

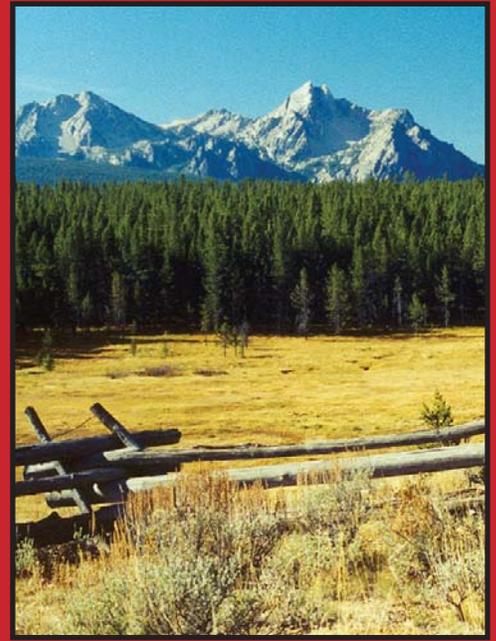
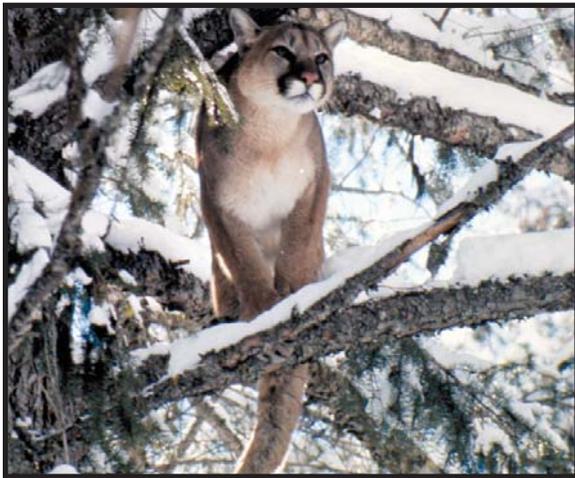


photo by Eric Stark, IDFG



Name Game

Everything has a name. You do. You have a first name and a last name. Most people also have a middle name.

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. The common name is the name most people use when talking about the animal. Have you every wondered how animals and plants got their scientific names?

The first part of a scientific name tells us what genus an animal or plant is in. Plants and animals with the same genus name are closely related. They have many things in common with each other. They would be close cousins.

The species part of the scientific name tells us something specific about the plant or animal. Plants and animals are usually given their scientific names by the person that first discovered them and wrote about them. Sometimes people have animals named after themselves. The white-tailed jackrabbit's scientific name is *Lepus townsendii*. It was named after J.K. Townsend. He was the person that first collected white-tailed jackrabbits.

Often animals and plants are named for some special features they have. The skunk's scientific name is *Mephitis mephitis*. This means bad odor, bad odor. That makes sense! 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.

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!

What's Your Niche?



Think of the town where you live. People in your community have jobs that make it a nice place to live. There are doctors that keep you healthy. Teachers that help you learn, and people that make food for you to eat.

Animals, plants and other organisms also have jobs and roles to play where they live. This role is called a **niche** (NICH). An animal's niche includes such things as where and how the animal gathers food and its link in a food chain.

Within ecosystems, every living thing has important jobs and roles. If one of these organisms is missing, the ecosystem will 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. Even the smelly skunk has a role in nature. Skunks eat more insects than anything else. They really love to eat grasshoppers, beetles and moth larvae. Many of the insects skunks eat like to munch on 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?

What's That?



black bear skull

You're walking along a trail. All of the sudden, you see something grayish-white peeking out of the tall grass. Leaning forward you realize what it is – a skull. Now the mystery really begins. What animal did that skull belong to, and how did it live its life?

This may be a hard question to answer, but the skull will give you some clues. One of the best clues you have are the teeth. Teeth tell you what an animal eats. Animals that eat meat need teeth that will help them cut and tear. Meat eaters, called **carnivores**, have meat cutting teeth along their cheeks. These teeth are sharp and pointed. When the top teeth and the bottom teeth come together, the teeth pass each other like scissors.

Sharp pointed teeth may work well for meat eaters, but they sure wouldn't help plant eaters. Plant eaters are called **herbivores**. Plants take a lot of chewing to break down. Just think how long you need to chew celery! Herbivores have tall teeth in the back of their mouths with flat tops. Flat teeth let the animals slide their top and bottom teeth against each other and grind the plants.

We have teeth in the back of our mouths with low bumpy crowns, so do bears. Teeth with this shape belong to **omnivores**. Skunks are in this group. Omnivores eat both meat and plants, so they need teeth that help cut and grind.

The location of the eye sockets on the skull can also tell a lot. Predators, animals that eat other animals, need to be able to tell distances. This comes in handy when reaching out to grab a mouse. Predators have eyes that face forward. Prey animals, animals that are eaten by other animals, have their eyes located more to the sides of their heads. This lets them look out for danger in almost every direction, without ever moving their heads.

Looking at these clues may not tell you what animal the skull came from, but it is a start. It may give you an idea of what the animal eats, and whether it is a predator or prey.

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? They sure have an odor! It would seem that skunks would be mustelids. At one time, scientists put them in this family, but things have changed.

One great thing about science is there is always something new to learn. As technology improves and changes, scientists sometimes change the way they look at things. One thing that is becoming popular to look at is something called DNA. 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. Some scientists thought skunks should be moved into their own group. Other people looked at what the scientists had found and agreed with them. Skunks and animals called stink badgers are now in their own family named **Mephitidae** (mef-i-ti-DAY-ee).

Technology has changed many of the things around us. It has given us computers that help us write and surf the web, and medicines that help keep us well. Technology has even placed skunks in a different family.

Which Animal Doesn't Belong in This Group?





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 of these 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. Milk snakes pretend to be coral snakes. Milk snakes do not have venom. The only way to tell them apart is to look at the pattern the colors make. 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!



poison dart frog

© photo by Michal Berec 2004



milkweed longhorn beetle

© photo by Robert Potts

A Skunky Word Search

P	Q	A	N	W	L	Z	F	C	U	X	W	I	J	S
Y	H	U	V	W	E	F	N	I	D	N	I	L	B	E
N	A	R	A	G	U	T	L	F	F	L	D	D	L	E
R	L	R	A	I	F	I	Y	I	U	T	C	V	C	S
L	V	N	P	M	H	Z	A	T	G	O	E	V	X	Q
R	A	A	Q	S	W	X	Z	N	Y	O	M	E	U	G
V	I	K	A	O	G	A	Z	E	O	J	R	A	N	W
Y	D	T	U	L	T	O	G	I	F	I	O	C	V	A
F	C	B	A	P	B	N	F	C	B	W	V	N	P	R
D	S	N	Y	B	I	Y	P	S	B	C	Y	K	M	M
V	D	B	Q	P	N	E	W	O	X	Z	A	V	M	E
S	A	X	M	I	N	S	E	C	T	S	W	U	D	R
B	S	O	A	I	G	L	A	F	F	C	A	U	X	I
F	T	C	D	J	H	U	L	N	Z	F	W	I	P	U
S	H	Z	U	V	Q	U	L	Y	D	E	N	S	H	C

WORDS

Away
Glands

Baby
Insects

Blind
Scientific

Dens
Spray

Fifteen
Stomping

Warmer

Skunks use their _____ only when they really need to.

The black and white stripes on a skunk mean stay _____.

The _____ name for the striped skunk means bad odor, bad odor.

_____ skunks are called kits.

Skunks sleep in _____.

To stay _____ in the winter, skunks may share a home.

A raised tail, _____ feet and clicking teeth mean stay back in skunk talk.

Skunks mostly eat _____.

The _____ in a skunk hold three teaspoons of stinky fluid.

Skunk spray can hit something that is _____ feet away from the skunk.

Baby skunks are born nearly naked, _____ and deaf.

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Wildlife Express is also available on the Idaho Department of Fish and Game website at no charge at <http://fishandgame.idaho.gov> For more information, call or write: *Wildlife Express*, Idaho Department of Fish and Game, 600 South Walnut, PO Box 25, Boise, Idaho, 83707 (208) 287-2874.

Lead Writer: Adare Evans

Layout and Design: Alyssa Jones

Contributors: Kevin Frailey • Renai Brogdon • Cristina Watson



WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU !

If you have a letter, poem or question for *Wildlife Express*, it may be included in a future issue! Send it to the address printed above!