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SKUNKS AS PETS

By Elroy C. Jensen, D.V.M., M.S.*

The skunk is a small, fur bearing, carnivorous, nocturnal mammal belonging to the weasel family (Mustelidae). It is easily recognized by its black and white color and noted for its strong scent. There are four species of skunks in North America, only two of these are present in the Midwest, the striped skunk and the spotted skunk. The other two, the hooded and the hognose skunk, are found in the Southwest. The striped skunk is the favorite as a pet.

Skunks have become the most popular pet of the wild carnivores because when obtained at a very early age, five or six weeks, they make affectionate and rewarding pets. Those raised from domestic strains appear to make the better pets. Since skunks are basically a wild animal, they must be worked with to make satisfactory pets. One so young that it must be fed with a bottle and nipple naturally becomes a good pet. To become a good pet they should not be kept with other skunks as they must be encouraged to seek the companionship of their owner. Daily handling is best as some have a tendency to become somewhat apprehensive when handled only infrequently. When getting acquainted with the creature for the first time, it is best to wear leather gloves to avoid being severely bitten.

Wild skunks as a rule have short or thin white stripes and little if any white in the tail. By selective breeding variations in the markings can be obtained. The most popular markings for the domesticated skunk are broad white stripes, two and one-half to three and one-half inches wide in the adult, and an all white, aristocratic tail. They can also be bred so that the offspring will have white feet and white mottlings on their abdomens.

Skunks do not breed exceptionally well in captivity, and a conception rate of 66% in one season is quite satisfactory (7). Skunks are seasonally polyestrous. In temperate zones they breed from the middle of February until the middle of March. When domesticated, the older females breed during the early part of the season while the younger are receptive during the latter part of the mating season. A few young females do not breed at all during the first year. It is not necessary to breed in pairs if one is raising these animals for the market. It is possible to use as many as five females to one male. All may be turned out together during the breeding season. They will live peaceably together until one to two weeks after conception when they tend to demand individual isolation. This could result in the older females fighting the male before the younger females are bred. In colony breeding this could create quite a problem. Probably the best and most certain method is isolated breeding where the males are kept separate and the females are introduced individually and left overnight if necessary. The gestation period is 62 to 64 days.

Only one litter is produced each year with an average litter being five although it may range from four to ten. At birth the young are called "kits" or kittens. They are devoid of hair, blind and weigh about one ounce or the size of a full grown mouse. The eyes open in about three weeks. The "kits" are completely dependent on their mother for food, warmth, and protection. Weaning time is about six to seven weeks. At birth the offspring are black but the white pigment in the skin shows exactly how wide the stripes will be and whether the tail will be black or white. When adults, they will weigh eight to ten pounds. The male is slightly heavier than its mate. Their life expectancy has been given as about fifteen years.

Skunks usually make good mothers, but

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it is advisable not to disturb them any more than necessary. When the babies arrive the mother will come out of her nest and stamp her feet to indicate that she doesn't want to be disturbed. If she becomes overly excited, she may stamp and kill her young in her efforts to protect them.

After being weaned, skunks may be fed commercial dog or cat food supplemented with horse meat and raw eggs. Cow's milk will cause diarrhea in the skunk (3). They also love bacon which may be given as an occasional snack. Their diet should be high in vitamins A and D so cod liver oil is a good additive. Skunks deficient in Vitamins A and D are susceptible to sprains of the legs and back (6). Baby skunks have an especially high requirement. In early fall skunks will have a voracious appetite in anticipation of hibernation. Incidentally, they do not under go a true hibernation but during extremely cold weather may sleep for several days. If fed excessively at this time, they may become very obese and sluggish. This excess fat is not easily lost.

Skunks may be housebroken as easily as cats. Do not let them outside unless they are fenced in as they have a way of wandering off. They may be kept in a kitchen or basement and make good mousers. They do not climb like cats or raccoons but will go up and down stairs. Due to their small head, harnesses are more satisfactory than collars if they are to be trained to a leash. If a skunk escapes, it may be box trapped using a strip of bacon as bait.

At birth skunks are provided with a protective mechanism which is peculiar to its species. The scent glands, located just inside the anal sphincter, contain a volatile chemical — a mercaptan containing a sort of alcohol-sulfur combination. Usually, they do not begin spraying until around six weeks old although they may stamp their feet and elevate their tail long before this. It is interesting to note, that a skunk after developing its spraying capabilities can project with accuracy for distances from nine to ten feet. They may eject the foul smelling secretion either from one or both glands simultaneously.

It requires about six ejections before their glands are completely empty. In spite of these ejections, the skunk himself rarely ever gets any of this material on itself which must require some careful maneuvering. Skunks may be descented (defrosted — disarmed) after they are three weeks of age. In my opinion, the ideal age is around six weeks old as there is still little danger of being sprayed and also because the papillae are not as friable at this age as they are when three weeks old. The technique I prefer is similar, with only slight modification, to that of Dr. Bradbury (1).

Descenting Technique

Instruments needed: No. 3 Bard-Parker handle, No. 11 blade (the bayonet type), Allis tissue forceps, curved mosquito forceps, rubber gloves (which can be disposed), a large glass jar and lid.

Anesthesia and Handling: Place the skunk in a glass container in which has been placed an ether soaked piece of cotton. It has been said that skunks can not emit scent when held off the ground by their tails. This is not exactly true as it can "spray" if it is able to curl up and grasp himself with his front feet. Little time should be lost in getting the skunk from his cage to the anesthetic jar as this will lessen the danger of being sprayed. Rarely will the skunk spray during the time it is in the anesthetic jar. If the animal is three months or older, I would suggest using Pentobarbital sodium given intraperitoneally at the rate of 1/5 cc diluted with 4/5 cc distilled water per pound of body weight. The animal's weight should be calculated quite accurately. A sack or sheet may be wrapped around the animal while it is suspended by its tail during the injection. Surgical anesthesia should occur in about ten minutes and last for about one hour.

Surgical Procedure: It is almost impossible to perform this operation aseptically but infection can be reduced to a minimum by using a chemical sterilizing agent such as a quaternary ammonium compound for the instruments. A small pledget of cotton may be dipped into this solution and applied to the operative site. I

prefer to have the assistant hold the anesthetized patient in dorsal recumbency on a makeshift table of some sort. The surgery should be performed in the open air away from any buildings so that mishaps will not necessitate a complete deodorizing of the hospital. When the rim of the anal aperture is rolled downward, the reddish colored nipple or papilla is clearly visible (Fig. 1). This is exposed by the assistant gently using his thumb and index finger in a downward motion to bring the papilla into view. It is at this time that too much pressure over the gland will cause the material to be ejected. Only expose one of the papilla at a time. After exposure, take a hemostat or an Allis tissue forceps (I prefer a rather dull jawed Allis tissue forceps) and clamp it onto the papilla. Do not lock the forceps as the tissue is very friable and may be crushed and the contents expelled. In fact, the nipple may be completely torn off and then removal becomes most complicated. Probably the best method to use under such circumstances is to incise over the gland and dissect (lateral to the anus) the gland free from the surrounding tissue. Adjacent to the papilla will be a small band of tissue consisting of the mucosa and a muscular layer. This muscular tissue must be scraped away from the neck of the gland so that only a white membrane remains which is in reality the wall of the scent gland (Fig. 2). Sometimes it is necessary to cut a few of the muscle strands so that the neck of the gland will be exposed. Hemorrhage will occur but is easily controlled by the use of a pledget of cotton or a gauze sponge. If too much of the anal sphincter is cut or its nerves are severed, one can expect an anal prolapse but this should not occur if the operation is done properly. When the neck has been completely exposed, then a gentle scraping action is applied to the tissue surrounding the gland while moderate traction is applied to the forceps attached to the papilla (Fig. 3). Too much traction at this time can result in rupture of the gland. As traction is applied, the scalpel serves only to separate the gland from the adjacent tissue. When the greater portion of the gland is exposed, removal becomes much

easier as there are only a few elastic fibers remaining at its base. These fibers can be severed with the scalpel (Fig. 4). However, one should not become too impatient with the procedure as this is a case where too much haste can be disastrous. The procedure is repeated in a similar manner on the other gland.

If the patient begins to wake up during the operation, it may be necessary to place him into the ether chamber once again. If the assistant is competent, a small amount of ether soaked cotton may be placed near the skunk's nose during the operation thus maintaining a satisfactory anesthetic level during the surgery. For the protection of the surgeon and assistant, some prefer to do this operation under a plate of glass. This makes the operation a little bit more tedious but does provide some protection against a "direct hit".

Post Operative Care: For two days post-operatively, the diet should be bland in nature and reduced in quantity so as to prevent diarrhea and a rectal prolapse which might occur if the skunk is placed on full feed following the operation. A small amount of an antibiotic ointment instilled into the surgical site postoperatively is usually sufficient treatment since the area heals quite rapidly. Surgical fatalities following this operation may occur but should be minimal providing care is taken when administering the anesthetic. Skunks over three months of age are more likely to succumb following this operation than are younger animal. This is probably due to a shock syndrome following the operation.

Neutralizing the Skunk Scent: It is a good idea to discard the scent glands by putting them in a airtight container so as to minimize residual odors in the area where surgery was performed. The best way to dissipate skunk odor is to apply tomato juice or ammonia water to the contaminated equipment. Since this is a volatile chemical, boiling clothes or hanging in the hot sun (in a vacated lot) will help remove the odor in time. Should a dog become "sprayed", several rather warm soapy baths will be helpful.

Skunks may not be shipped by express unless they are deodorized. Incidentally,

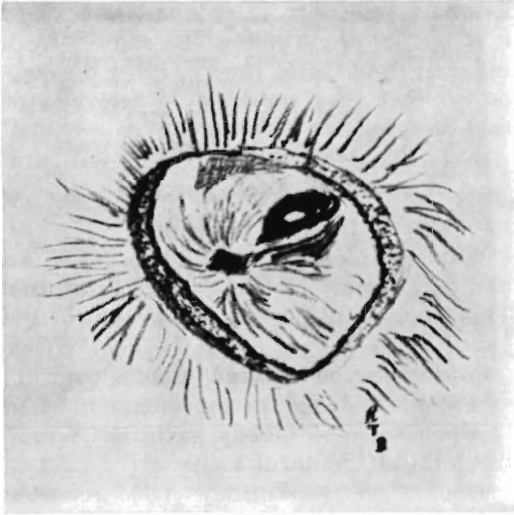
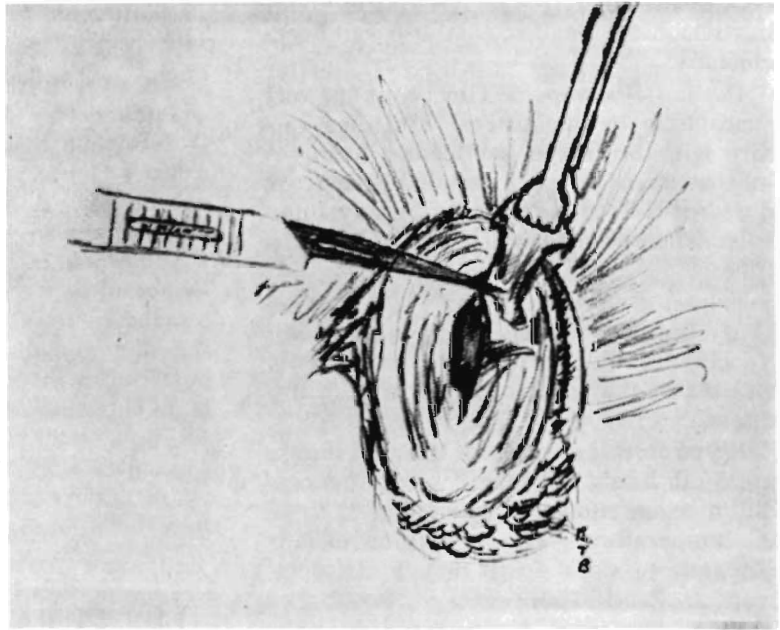


Figure 1 The rim of the anal aperture has been rolled downward and one of the papillae has been exposed. The opposite papilla is barely visible due to the folds of tissue adjacent to the papilla.

Figure 2 The mucosa and muscular layer has been dissected from the duct of the scent gland. This duct may be identified by its whitish color in contrast to that of the surrounding reddish colored muscular tissue.



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it is a good practice to check with the state game commission before having a wild skunk as a pet as it is against the law in many states unless a breeder's permit is obtained.

If it is desired, female skunks may be spayed when six months of age. Castration of the male may be performed at around the same age. This will prevent seasonal disturbance in personality which might make them a less desirable pet.

Diseases of Skunks

Rabies: In the wild, skunks have become one of the largest reservoirs for this disease. One author has suggested that they might even be an asymptomatic carrier although research along this line is too scanty to be very conclusive. Semple type, phenolized nerve tissue vaccine is recommended. Chick embryo vaccine has been used in the skunk on an experimental basis with good results but the numbers have been too small to establish valid conclusions.

Canine Distemper: The skunk is very susceptible to this disease and dies rapidly with an acute septicemic form. A killed vaccine is recommended giving two doses of 1-2 cc each at 14-21 day intervals. The author usually gives this at the time of descenting.

Feline Enteritis: Many veterinarians give a prophylactic dose of Feline Enteritis Vaccine to the skunk. One investigator (4) stated they are not susceptible to this disease.

Respiratory Infections: Usually skunks are quite hardy but may develop this condition when subjected to sudden changes in temperature. The condition usually responds to sulfa drugs or a broad spectrum antibiotic (5).

Rectal Prolapse: A common occurrence due to severe enteritis or following the descenting operation. Replacement is easy and usually there is no further complications. Reduce the food intake, giving only bland foods for two to three days.

Lower Jaw Infections: Most frequently found in the adult. The condition responds well to oxytetracycline.

Leptospirosis: Roth and Adams (8) have isolated *Leptospira canicola* from

five wild skunks in Louisiana. At present it is not known whether the skunks were infected from cattle, dogs or other animals or whether they served as a reservoir of this disease.

Enteritis: May be dietary, internal parasites or bacterial — treat accordingly.

Internal Parasites

Ascaris columaris (roundworm) — An ascarid found in the small intestine. Treatment would be similar to that of the cat or dog.

Physaloptera maxillans (stomach worm) — Found attached to the stomach. Can produce a severe bloody gastritis. Vermifuges are of doubtful value.

Hookworms — Whitney (9) reported finding this parasite in the skunk on a breeding farm. He did not identify the species.

Trichinella spiralis — Undoubtedly caused by the skunks carnivorous nature. Very difficult to diagnose clinically. No satisfactory treatment.

External Parasites

Trichodectes Mephitidis (biting louse) — Is visible macroscopically. Treat with a flea or louse powder which can be used on the cat. A bath with a 2% pine oil solution is also very effective.

Dracunculus insignis (Guineau worm) — Found in the subcutaneous tissue. The female burrows a small opening through the skin and discharges larvae when the host comes in contact with water. There is an intermediate host. It may be identified by a small purulent wound in the skin associated with considerable pruritis. The worm may readily be removed by probing into the wound.

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Figure 3 At this stage a greater portion of the gland has been exposed by gentle traction and a scraping motion with the scalpel. If the duct begins to tear, a hemostat may be placed below to avoid spillage of the gland contents.

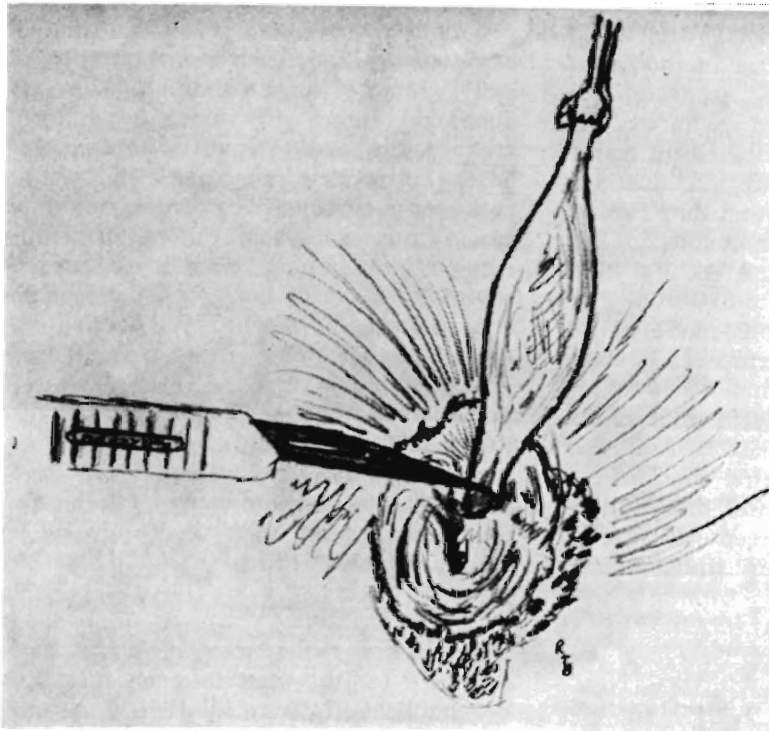
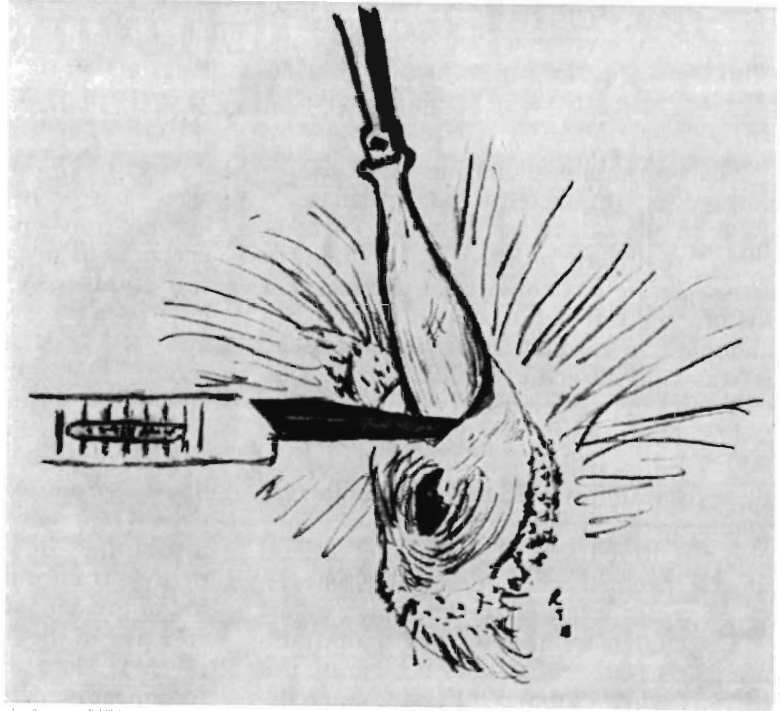


Figure 4 When the gland has been almost completely exposed, all that remains is a few elastic fibers. These fibers may be cut with the scalpel.