



Skunk Outlook Spotty

BY RANDY ZELLERS

Biologists Race to Learn More About Declining Skunk Species

"Skunk" is sometimes enough to cause people to hold their breath out of instinct. Poultry farmers and turkey hunters consider these nest predators on par with cockroaches, and they'll go out of their way to kill them. With the exception of Pepé Le Pew, there are few advocates for these musky members of the weasel family. But another skunk shares this misunderstood reputation with the striped skunk, and it's disappearing throughout the nation.

Above: The eastern spotted skunk was recently named, "A species of greatest conservation need," and hunting them has been cancelled for 2006-07. Photo by Damon B. Lesmeister.

The eastern spotted skunk rarely grows larger than a fox squirrel and is characterized by white blotches instead of stripes on its black fur. It has the same pungent defense system as striped skunks and is not afraid to use it. However, there are so few spotted skunks left, they're rarely the cause of skunk complaints. In fact, Arkansans who have seen a spotted skunk should count themselves lucky.

Under the Radar

"We know that spotted skunks have been on the decline since the 1940s," said Blake Sasse, Arkansas Game and Fish Commission nongame mammal program coordinator. "No extensive research has ever been done in Arkansas and only two studies have been done on the animals at all.

"It's hard to believe that a species that was once common has become so rare without attracting much attention."

Because of the lack of basic information, the AGFC and the University of Missouri have teamed up to find out what happened to these small skunks in the Ozarks and Ouachitas.

Matthew Gompper, a University of Missouri biology professor who's leading the study, said, "During the 1940s, Arkansas trappers would turn in around 2,000 spotted skunk pelts a year, and Missouri, Nebraska and Iowa routinely posted annual harvests in excess of 50,000. Now only a handful of pelts are being turned in throughout the skunk's range."

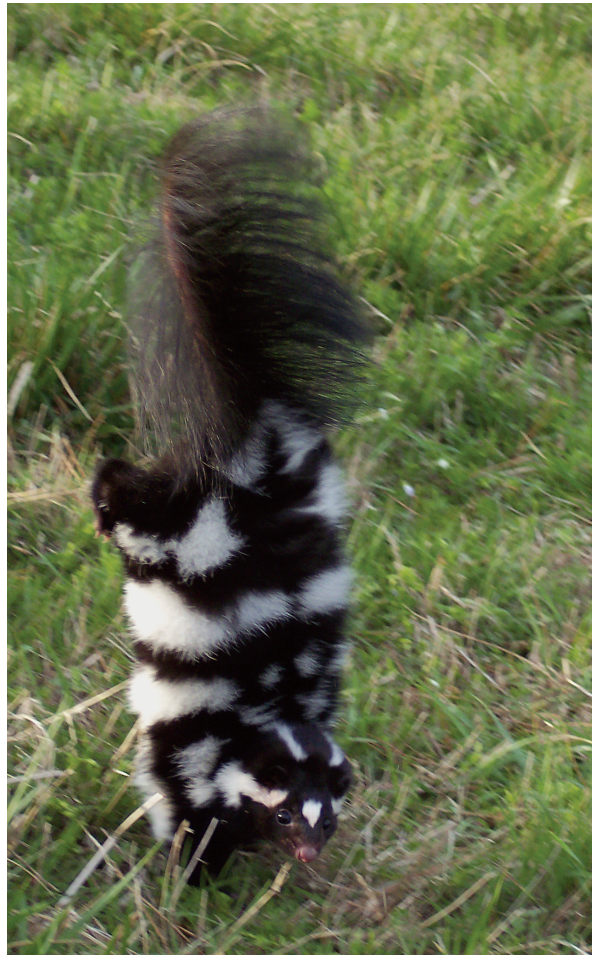
Strokes of Luck

"We were very lucky when this project began," Gompper said. "A completely unrelated study on other

Ouachita animals started catching spotted skunks in their live traps. So many were caught that we decided this might be a good area to focus a branch of our skunk research."

So far, luck has held.

"We've managed to capture and radio-collar around 20 individuals, which is more than all of the skunks turned in by Arkansas trappers in most years since the 1980s. But many of the skunks we track are dying from predation. Spotted skunks seem to



When you see one of these spotted devils doing a handstand, it's not a time to laugh. This is usually your last warning before they spray. Photo by Damon B. Lesmeister.

be on the menu for many woodland animals, including owls, coyotes and bobcats. And the large litter sizes of these animals indicate high rates of predation are probably common."

Research Revelations

Although biologists continue their research, they've already discovered a few noteworthy facts.

Unlike the larger striped skunk known for raiding turkey nests and terrorizing chicken farmers, the spotted skunk rarely eats anything but insects.

"Almost all skunk scats we have found in our research have been made up of entirely insect remains,"

Gompper said. "Every now and then we may find the remains of a small reptile or mammal, but that's about it."

The spotted skunk also may benefit from the work done to recover other species.

"Quite a few of our skunks are choosing dens where the Forest Service is burning to increase red-cockaded woodpecker habitat. Most skunks choose underground dens, and the burned-out root wads are excellent for raising young. But we still need to conduct more research to establish their primary habitat needs."

Potent Public Relations

In addition to research, biologists are trying to spread the word about the spotted skunk's decline.

"We've been fortunate enough to find a young spotted skunk abandoned by its mother," Gompper said. "We raised it around people and had the scent glands removed so it can be shown in outreach programs. We hope the more people learn

about these animals, the more they will understand why we're trying so hard to protect them from future declines." **AW**