



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

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FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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SKUNKS VALUABLE ANIMALS FOR FARMERS: NICE PETS

Calling a man a skunk ought to be a compliment instead of a slur.

That, at least, is the opinion of officials of the Fish and Wildlife Service, United States Department of the Interior, who claim that the much-maligned "polecat" in reality is a patient animal that may make a good pet and, at the same time, is economically important.

A Fish and Wildlife inventory of the fur catch in the United States last year indicates that some 2,170,000 skunks were trapped in 36 States and the pelts sold at fur auctions. The Federal officials believe, however, that the annual catch in the entire country is probably 30 to 50 percent greater than the reported take, or an estimated 3 to 3-1/2 million skunks a year.

In February 1941, one large fur auction company sold skunk pelts from 35 cents for small ones to \$3.60 each for prime large northern pelts.

"Skunks are mostly beneficial to man," Service officials declared.

"They are important to agricultural interests because they feed on insects, chiefly beetles and grasshoppers, grubs, and other forms of pests."

Excellent mouse and rat hunters, skunks are welcomed around barns and in the fields where field mice and rats like to feed on grain.

Sometimes the skunk is not a welcomed guest, the wildlife officials admit, especially when the "polecat" lives near or under the farmhouse. "But such individuals can easily be controlled without disposing of them," it was explained.

In some restricted sections, particularly on waterfowl and certain upland game nesting areas, the skunk becomes objectionable because of its predation on nests. A serious egg robber in game areas, the skunk is controlled by large-scale trapping operations.

Contrary to popular opinion the skunk is not an aggressive animal who launches an attack at the drop of a hat--or at the raising of a tail. Scientists say that most skunks are easy-going individuals that dislike using the powerful fluids they can eject.

Skunks will put up with a surprising amount of abuse on most occasions before they lose their temper and spray their powerfully scented musk. But persons are not encouraged to experiment with a skunk's patience.

When a skunk lets go with an attack, no place within two or three yards of the animal is safe from the fluid. One attack does not empty the gland sac. The skunk can defend itself three or four times in rapid succession. Usually one shot is enough for any would-be intruder.

32 Kinds of Skunks

There are three principal groups of skunks, the more common being the small spotted skunk and the large common skunk. In all there are about 32 recognized kinds in the three groups.

Caught for their fur by young boys as well as professional trappers, skunk pelts command varying prices. As the width and length of the stripes decrease, the price of the pelts increases. Solid black pelts bring top prices. Since the fur of the skunk becomes prime in fall, this is the best time of year to trap the animals and obtain the highest price for the pelt.

Nocturnal in habit, skunks are seldom seen during the daytime. The young in a litter range from 2 to 10 with 6 an average sized litter.

That skunks are amiable animals has been proved by many individuals who have captured young ones and raised them as pets around the home. These animals have shown themselves to be intelligent and as playful as cats. Persons who have not trusted the skunk's discretion and control have descented the animals. This requires a bit of minor surgery that makes the animal incapable of discharging musk.

Some persons have used skunks as "watchdogs" to keep intruders away from homes. Even the most fearless thief avoids the skunk. A few years ago an ingenious man who was tired of having valuables stolen from his car captured a young skunk, descented the animal, and raised it as a pet. Whenever the man used his automobile, he carried the animal with him. After parking his car, he tied the skunk to the steering wheel. His car was never molested.

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