

## What Makes a Skunk Skunky?

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*Note: Dallas has been an occasional guest columnist for THE NEBLINE and has brought fresh insight into wildlife problems to our readers. This will be his last article as he has recently taken a specialist position with the USDA Wildlife Service working on their new Wildlife Disease Program. Best wishes to Dallas on his new venture!*

The black and white skunk is probably the most recognizable animal in North America. For good reason, people instinctively cringe when they see this malodorous marvel of nature. But what makes a skunk "skunky"?



### Physical Characteristics

A pair of glands and associated muscles that lie on either side under the tail allow the characteristic smell to be sprayed ten feet or more! To see a movie clip on a close up of this action, see: [www.terrierman.com/skunk.htm](http://www.terrierman.com/skunk.htm) Warning! This video is not for the faint of heart! The glands contain only about a tablespoon of the amber-colored musk but five or six sprays can be made before they run out of juice!

### Behavior Characteristics

When skunks prance their feet, chatter their teeth, arch their backs, and, of course, lift their tail, it is a sign that spraying may occur. Skunks in cage traps don't always show these signs so it is best to approach a captive with a raised blanket while walking slowly toward it and talking softly so as not to agitate it. In case you're wondering, I have never tried out the theory that skunks are unable to spray when you lift their tail so the back legs are off of the ground! It's always best to slowly uncover the trap and slowly walk away allowing the skunk to escape on its own. Cage traps with doors that fall open when the trap is overturned can greatly assist in releasing the captive. *Note: In Nebraska, sixty-two skunks have tested positive for rabies so far during 2003. It's best to contact the municipal animal control office for skunk problems.*

Skunk odor under buildings doesn't mean a skunk has made a den and often is a result of an unfortunate dog or cat retreating there after being sprayed. Use

screens or other materials to exclude skunks under buildings. Also cover window wells and block pet doors at night. To repel skunks under buildings, use talk radio and bright lights beginning in late evening (be careful of fire hazards).

### Essence of "Skunk"

Depending upon the species of skunk, three groups of odor-causing chemicals create the smell of skunk. People can smell the oily musk at ten parts per billion molecules! The odor is repugnant to most, but at low concentrations of the odor, some people seem to have no aversion or even like it! The smell goes away over a period of weeks but most people don't have the time. So a series of steps are recommended to speed up this process.

### Getting Rid of the Essence

#### SPACES

This process should involve at least some of the following steps in order:

- **Removal** — wipe surfaces that show the musk. Use respirators with organic vapor cartridges if available.
- **Ventilate** — use negative pressure to create exhaust ventilation
- **Volatilize** — raise air temperature, if needed and use fans to circulate air.
- **Oxidate** — use oxygen or chlorine bleaches (Warning! These can cause changes in color of surfaces, fabrics or pets, so test a small area first.) A solution of 10:1 or 20:1 water to chlorine bleach works best. Detergent can be added. Be sure to rinse the surface thoroughly.
- **Neutralize** — neutralizers bind with odor chemicals. A list of these deodorizers (such as Enz-odor™, Forumulair™ and Ecosorb™ may be found on the Internet Center for Wildlife Damage Management at [wildlifedamage.unl.edu](http://wildlifedamage.unl.edu)

*Note: The perfume neutrolem alpha probably only masks the odor but does a good job. It is available through Vigon International at 1-877-VIGON-39 or 570-476-6300.*

#### CLOTHES

- Dry cleaning
- Chlorine and oxygen bleaches (See warning as above.)
- Campfires of cedar or juniper.

#### PETS

Mix fresh Krebaum's formula (1 Qt. 3% hydrogen peroxide + 1/4 C. baking soda

see SKUNKY on page 11

## Catnip Attracts Cats and Repels Pests

Barb Ogg  
Extension Educator

The attraction of cats to catnip has been known for centuries and has given us the common name of this plant. An essential oil — nepetalactone — triggers an amazing reaction in cats: sniffing, licking and chewing the plant with head shaking, chin and cheek and body rubbing. Eye dilation and drooling may also occur. Cats respond to tiny amounts of nepetalactone — concentrations approaching one part per billion. It is interesting that only about two thirds of cats respond to catnip. It is an inherited trait— breeds originating from Asia typically don't respond to catnip.

Catnip (*Nepeta cataria*), a perennial herb in the mint family, was introduced to North America by European settlers and grows wild in most of the U.S. Catnip tea was used by settlers as a folk remedy for colds and fever, cramps, migraines and other disorders. Despite this widespread use, the pharmaceutical uses of catnip have not been studied very much.

Even though the response of cats to catnip is well known, many people are unaware that catnip oil repels a number of different insect species, including planthoppers and spittlebugs, German cockroaches, subterranean termites, mosquitoes and several beetle species.

Researchers at Iowa State University have patented nepetalactone as a repellent for

cockroaches, mosquitoes, mites, ticks, spiders and other insects. It may have the greatest commercial potential as a mosquito repellent because it is 10 times more potent than DEET — the most effective mosquito repellent on the market today. Iowa State researchers are now testing the effectiveness against *Culex tarsalis*, the mosquito that transmits West Nile virus. Herbal product businesses have capitalized on the early research done at Iowa State and are already selling repellent products on the Internet.

Catnip oil also repels termites. Researchers have found that termites refused to tunnel through a catnip oil-treated sand barrier. Unfortunately, nepetalactone breaks down too quickly in the soil to be a commercially viable chemical barrier. But, this knowledge may lead chemists to develop new products with similar chemistry that are longer lasting.

Catnip oil also has potential as a feeding deterrent for vertebrate pests such as deer, rabbits and squirrels. A recent study showed that catnip (plus daffodil and hot pepper extracts,) applied to potential food was more effective than any commercial repellent tested for white-tailed deer.



Photo courtesy of Purdue University

Not all pests are repelled by catnip. In fact, grasshoppers actually like catnip and produce defensive secretions three times more repellent to ants than when they feed on other plants. Grasshoppers sequester defensive compounds from plants in their body which may account for their ability to feed successfully on a wide range of plants.

So how can you use this information? One Web site suggests that people concerned about West Nile virus and mosquitoes might want to plant catnip in their yard. But, be sure to consider the consequences carefully before you buy seeds next spring. Once catnip leaves are bruised and release their aromatic oils — which might be necessary to repel mosquitoes — your yard will attract cats from the neighborhood. Interested in trying catnip as a personal mosquito repellent? Reports from people who have used it say that cats respond to them like they were a big catnip plant. If you don't really love cats, you'll want to stick with DEET.

## Feeding Backyard Birds — Make Your Own Suet

Use suet to attract insect-eating birds like woodpeckers, chickadees and nuthatches. You can buy suet or make your own. Here is a quick and easy suet recipe you can make at home:

- **3 cups melted suet (available from your butcher shop or meat counter at the grocery)**
- **3 cups yellow cornmeal**
- **1 cup chunk style peanut butter**

Melt the suet in a pan and add the cornmeal and peanut butter. Bird seeds, raisins, rolled oats, unsalted nutmeats, dehydrated egg, dried fruit like raisins or apple bits also can be added. You can add or subtract ingredients depending on what you have on hand, but don't use ingredients that have rich seasoning.

Pour the suet mixture into cupcake papers in a muffin tin to harden. Remove the papers, and the cakes are ready for the birds. You can make up several batches of the suet "muffins"

and place them in a tightly-sealed freezer bag in the freezer until you are ready to use them.

### Make Your Own Suet Log

Find a small log and drill 1-inch holes in different locations around the log. Screw a small hook into the top of the log for

hanging. Press the slightly cooled suet mixture into the holes. Hang the suet-filled log outdoors. When the birds have eaten the suet out of the holes, just replace it with more of the

suet you've made and store in your freezer (you'll need to let the suet muffins thaw so they can be worked into the holes of the log). Note: We had fewer problems with starlings when we used this type of feeder at home!

### Other Ideas

Use your imagination — put the suet in nylon/plastic net onion or orange sacks, press the suet into pine cones or check out commercial suet feeders at your favorite store.

### Hanging Your Feeder

Hang suet feeders on or near a tree, on a wooden post or perhaps from your seed feeder. Be sure to hang it high enough so pets can't reach it.

Homemade suet is best used during cold winter months so it doesn't melt. Commercial no-melt suet preparations can be used throughout the year. Keep it high enough so pets can't reach it.

For more information, read the UNL NEBGUIDE *Backyard Wildlife: Feeding Birds* by Ron Johnson, Extension Wildlife Specialist, available online at [lanaster.unl.edu/enviro/pest/wildlife.htm](http://lanaster.unl.edu/enviro/pest/wildlife.htm). (SC)

### What is Suet?

Suet is the hard, white fat from around the beef kidney area, often available from butcher counters. Other fat sources including deer fat and rib cages also can be used.