

Natural Life of the Lost Coast

Little Stinkers — the western spotted skunk

By Kim A. Cabrera

One evening, I heard scratching sounds coming from a supposedly empty trashcan. I had been smelling skunk scent in the area for a couple of days and had assumed that there had been a skunk fight. When I looked into the trashcan, two dark beady eyes peered up at me. It looked like the skunk had been in there for days. It had fallen in during a search for food and had not been able to climb back out.

I carefully gave the trapped skunk a bowl of water and some cat food, which it devoured immediately. Then, after its hunger and thirst were satisfied, I took the trashcan outside and carefully tipped it on its side. The little skunk waddled over and sniffed my feet, then ran off into the night. This was my first close encounter with a western spotted skunk (*Spilogale gracilis*).

You may see these little skunks roaming local roads at night, their preferred activity time. Like their name implies, they have spots rather than the stripes that are characteristic of the larger, and more common, striped skunk.

Spotted skunks have long claws on their front feet, which they use for climbing and digging. Skunks are omnivorous, which means they eat a variety of foods, including invertebrates, eggs, fruit, lizards, and mice. Their black and white coat color is a warning to predators, called aposematic coloration. Predators learn that skunks have a potent defense mechanism and leave them alone.

The spotted skunk does a handstand as a threat display, and then sprays if its attacker does not retreat. The spray can shoot 12 to 15 feet, and is composed of chemicals called thiols. Although the spotted



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIM CABRERA

The western spotted skunk

skunk is small, about the size of a half-grown cat, their spray is strong.

If you or your pets get sprayed, here is an odor-neutralizing recipe that came from one of my professors at HSU who studied the chemistry of skunk spray, Dr. William Wood. It really works. This solution changes the molecules and neutralizes the odor. Plus, you can get the ingredients at the local market.

Ingredients:

- 1 quart of 3 percent hydrogen peroxide
- 1/4 cup of baking soda (sodium bicarbonate)
- 1 teaspoon of liquid dish detergent

After you mix these ingredients together, bathe your pet in it. Let it sit for five minutes. Then, rinse your pet. You can repeat the bath if needed. Don't try to store any leftover mixture, as it will not work, so you might as well use it all up. Also, don't put this mixture in a closed container.

Use open mixing containers

only as this mixture gives off oxygen gas, so it will expand in a closed space. This could break the container, a good reason not to use glass. Remember that hydrogen peroxide is the stuff people use to bleach their hair, so don't be surprised if your pet comes out of this bath with a lighter coat color.

Kim A. Cabrera lives in Redway. She works for Humboldt County Office of Education and the International Society of Professional Trackers. Cabrera studied wildlife at HSU and operates the Beartracker's Animal Tracks Den web site at www.bear-tracker.com.

This article is part of a series about natural life on the Lost Coast, sponsored by the Lost Coast Interpretive Association, which may be contacted at lostcoastintassoc@gmail.com. For photos, educational information and news about the Lost Coast, please visit the Lost Coast Interpretive Association's Facebook page. www.facebook.com/pages/Lost-Coast-Interpretive-Association/241253955966296.