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SPRING 2008

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Skunk-proof your property

WITH FOUR DOGS leading the way, our family took a walk in the woods one sunny day. Suddenly, as the last dog disappeared around a curve in the trail, we heard a strange yelp-whimper. Seconds later, all four canines bolted past, heading for home.

"Bear?" I whispered to my husband.

"There's only one way to find out," he said, peeping around a poplar's wide, protective trunk. Then he burst out laughing. A skunk was also out for an afternoon stroll. And it had sent the dogs running as if for dear life.

Many humans have the same reaction to skunks. Some believe the only good skunk is a dead one. Though often considered pests themselves, these small mammals, renowned for their foul-smelling odour, are part of nature's pest control program.

Despite occasional daytime encounters with pets and people, skunks are nocturnal feeders. A member of the weasel family, the omnivorous skunk benefits humans by eating a wide variety of insects and rodents. It also eats lizards, birds and their eggs. As opportunistic feeders, skunks will eat carrion, garbage and pet food as available.

Although skunks are often found in residential areas, their preferred feeding habitat is wetland. A Saskatchewan study for the Prairie Habitat Joint Venture indicated skunks avoid rural and city neighbourhoods except when they're looking for a suitable birthing den or a cosy place to spend the winter. Then they will settle into quiet, dark, dry spaces under outbuildings, decks or brush piles.

A clean yard and sealed openings beneath buildings and decks will discourage skunks from settling in. Late summer or early fall, after skunks and their young have left maternal dens and before they've begun preparing a den for their inactive winter period, is ideal for skunk-proofing.

If you suspect a skunk has found shelter near your home, Shawn Kendel of Innovative Pest Control in Sechelt, British Columbia, recommends monitoring its

activity. This will help determine the best approach for removal. Between April and June, there may be four to eight babies (kits) present.

"We encourage people to leave them until they're mobile," at about eight or nine weeks of age, Kendel says. Call a professional for help in removing them.

You may be able to skunk-proof your yard and home, but can you skunk-proof your dog? Dr. Tammy Wilde, a veterinarian in St. Albert, Alberta, recommends training your pet for immediate recall with an emergency word. "I've trained my dogs to

do a quick double-take back to me when I call the emergency word," she says.

Her dogs' special word is "cookie." To make an emergency word effective, reward your dog with a food treat whenever it returns quickly, she says.

Wilde also recommends keeping dogs' vaccinations current, because skunks may carry rabies, which is a fatal disease.

If your dog does suffer a malodorous misfortune, try a commercial product like Skunk Off or a homemade concoction, Wilde says.

—TAMMIE BURAK

Shawn Kendel's tips for discouraging skunks:

- Remove clutter, woodpiles, excess vegetation and other shelters.
- Feed pets indoors, and ensure that pet doors are secure.
- Eliminate or secure attractive food sources such as compost and bird feeders. Clean up bird feeder spills.
- Keep garbage in pest-proof containers.
- Cover entry points below decks and crawl spaces using 1/4-inch metal screen or flashing.
- Secure chicken runs and coops.

Dr. Tammy Wilde's Eau de Skunk antidote for dogs:

Combine 2 cups (500 mL) each of hydrogen peroxide and baking soda, and 3 tablespoons (45 mL) dishwashing liquid. Wearing rubber gloves, rub this mixture into your dog's coat and leave for up to 24 hours before rinsing. Then wash your dog with pet shampoo and rinse. (Do this sooner if the dog appears uncomfortable.) Protect the dog's eyes with artificial tear gel during treatment.

