

Scent-sational Companions

Skunks are affectionate, intelligent pets for owners who offer the proper care.

ARTICLE AND PHOTOS BY DEBORAH CIPRIANI

Most people who keep domestic skunks are stalwart believers in their suitability as pets. Why? Skunks are intelligent, affectionate and have distinctive personalities. Skunk owners must be willing to put in a lot of work and pay careful attention to their skunk's emotional and dietary needs to avoid aggressive behavior and health problems. Skunks have their own personalities, and although many people think they will train their skunk, it's usually the other way around!

Get To Know The Skunk

The average life expectancy of a domestic skunk is eight years, and the average weight is 4 to 10 pounds, depending on bone structure.

Skunks are available in various colors, including black, brown/chocolate or smoke/gray and white, apricot, albino, white with dark eyes, lavender, champagne and mahogany. In addition to colors, skunks also have various coat patterns, including classic stripe, chip, marble and swirl.

Skunks only mate once a year, between January and March. Litter size ranges from one to 13. Kits (babies) can be purchased from legally licensed breeders or pet stores after they are weaned at approximately 5 weeks of age. De-scenting is done by the breeder at 3 to 5 weeks of age.

Play The Skunk Way!

Pet skunks engage in unusual play — they run around, stop suddenly and stomp their front paws, then turn in a U-shape as if they are about to spray. Some play hide and chase.

A skunk standing in one place and stomping is typically warning you off; this is how wild skunks threaten a possible attacker. Note that running toward or away from someone and stomping is typically play behavior in domestic skunks.

Skunks don't usually vocalize, but sometimes they make sounds similar to a squealing pig or chirping bird.

Kits are full of energy and want to run and play with their owners and other pets. Owners are advised to get their skunk up early in the day for play so that it sleeps at night.

A Skunk's Abode

A domestic skunk's habitat must be skunk-proofed against poisons, cleaners, heating vents/ducts and access to the outdoors. Unlike dogs and cats, skunks have no homing instinct and can wander away, rarely finding their way back. With no scent glands to protect themselves they are vulnerable to predators.

A skunk kit should be kept in a large cage or blocked-off



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room with a litter box, blankets, a small nesting box and safe toys. A bowl of fresh water should be available at all times. Kits should not be kept in cages after 3 months of age, at which time owners should slowly introduce them to the remainder of the house and other pets and never be left unsupervised until it has been determined that no harm will come to them.

Nurturing Nutrition

Kits should be fed at least four or five times a day to prevent seizures, while adult skunks require only two fresh meals each day. Skunks have very sensitive digestive systems and cannot properly digest foods that are processed or contain chemical preservatives or additives. Skunks do best when they are fed an all-natural diet containing whole foods that are intended for human consumption, although some owners feed a raw diet.

In order for a skunk to remain healthy, its owner should only supplement the diet with an all-natural, grain-free dog food. Suggested menu items include tofu and sweet potatoes, egg white omelets, lean chicken, turkey, low-fat cheese, yogurt, cereals, whole grains, bugs, mealworms, raw chicken necks and fresh vegetables. A high-protein, low-fat diet is paramount. Rotate foods daily so they will not tire of same

food.

Skunks should not be fed birdseed, cat food or fried/fatty foods. Asparagus has been known to cause seizures in skunks; chocolate and/or grapes have been known to cause death.

Along with a well-balanced diet, skunks require calcium with D³ for bones and the amino acid taurine for muscle and heart health. Oils such as extra virgin olive or flax seed oil are important, because skunks have very dry skin. A high-quality multi-vitamin should also be given. Consult with your veterinarian to determine the best diet for your skunk.

Training & Care

Skunks require a lot of attention, love and patience. Spend as much time as possible with a kit, holding and talking to it so that it develops a good temperament as an adult.

Litter training should begin as soon as a skunk kit goes home. The owner should take note of which corners the skunk likes to potty in and place litter boxes in those places. Although skunks can be easily trained, some may only occasionally or never use a litter box.

A skunk's nails should be cut every month. Bathing can be done occasionally with a non-medicated, non-pesticide pet or baby shampoo.

Skunks often play-bite, but this behavior should not be encouraged. Skunk kits can also be tiny toe sharks, so owners may have to wear slippers or shoes in the house.

Skunks must be trained that biting is something that will not be tolerated. Use the word “No!” when training; skunks should never be hit. Skunks are very smart and will easily learn right from wrong. They will even purposely “do wrong” in return for mistreatment or neglect.

All About Health

Common health concerns for skunks are seizures (sometimes due to low blood sugar), worm infestation, malnutrition, obesity and calcium deficiency. To prevent these problems, feed skunks frequently, give the necessary supplements and worm when necessary. An additional health concern for skunks is rectal prolapse (intestines coming out of the rectum), which can be a sign of worms, constipation, diarrhea or emotional stress.

Domestic skunks can be vaccinated for distemper, although some have had adverse reactions to vaccines. Some veterinarians suggest administering rabies shots, but this does not prevent the state health department from taking a skunk if a bite is reported, and the skunk will normally be destroyed. Because skunks will be destroyed if a bite occurs, never allow anyone outside of the immediate family to handle your skunk. If a visitor asks to pet a skunk and you wish to allow it, hold the skunk with your hand over its head and let the person touch its back.

Neutering of males and females should be done between 4 and 6 months of age, depending on weight and health. Failure to neuter a skunk can cause behavior problems, including urination outside of the litter box, extreme stress and health problems later on. Some skunks may have a musky odor that fades away after neutering. Many times when people purchase a skunk they mistake the term “being fixed” for being neutered. With skunks, being fixed usually means de-scented. Veterinarians should use isoflurane gas for anesthesia, and not a ketamine injection. Ketamine could cause adverse effects in skunks.

Before You Own

Domestic skunks are not legal in all states, so prospective skunk owners must contact their state wildlife department and/or local wildlife officer to learn the laws on skunk possession and the license that is required in their home state.

Another prerequisite to owning a skunk is finding a veterinarian who is willing to care for the skunk, because not all vets are willing to treat domestic skunks. Skunks can get sick very quickly if not cared for properly. 🐾

Deborah Cipriani is the founder of Skunk Haven, a nonprofit organization dedicated to collecting medical data to set standards on skunks; providing rehabilitation and care to homeless pet skunks; providing education on caring for skunks and presenting “skunk awareness” programs to the public. She uses some of her

own money to help pay for the costs associated with skunk rescue.

Visit SmallAnimalChannel.com/XXXXXXX to create a website for your pet skunk!

Skunk 411

For up-to-date information on skunk care please visit www.skunkhaven.net.

Skunks have no homing instinct and can wander away, rarely finding their way back.



CLASSIC



CLASSIC

Skunk Varieties

Skunk coat patterns can be the classic stripe, chip (with a white spot by each leg) and marble or swirl. Coat colors have an even greater variety, including black, brown/chocolate or smoke/gray and white, apricot, albino, white with dark eyes, lavender, champagne and mahogany.

//DEBORAH, CAN YOU SAY WHAT COLORS EACH ARE??



SWIRL



SWIRL



CHIP



CHIP



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Skunks are illegal to own as pets in some areas, so check your state and local regulations



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Skunks require a high-protein, low-fat diet; their digestive system is delicate, so avoid sudden changes in diet.