Skunks

Agnes Muszynska

One summer, a while ago, I took a two-week business trip. On returning home I went to my garden to collect some parsley and dill for dinner. My garden was usually a mess. A lot of weeds growing high, almost taking over all the beds of planted vegetables. Thousands of grasshoppers grazed happily on my vegetables, and jumped out from under my feet as I made my way to the garden. Ugly and annoying as they were, the grasshoppers were relatively harmless, and I had learned to tolerate them. On this particular sunny and warm afternoon as I approached the patch of parsley, I was not surprised to hear the familiar noises of the grasshoppers, coming from the weeds. I did not pay much attention to the grasshoppers. It suddenly struck me, however, that the incoming sounds were not as uniform as usual, but came from one specific place just in front of me. I took one more step forward, and literally froze. Three feet away in the weeds, was a skunk! While I was unable to make a move, and my heart pounded heavily, this small, pretty animal with handsome white stripe over his black, furry back, slowly crawled toward the juniper bushes and disappeared from sight. I retreated cautiously and returned to the house. My thoughts were full on anxiety: "I have a big problem, what to do?!" I had known skunks only from books. In Poland there are no skunks!



Skunks frolicking in the nearby field

Usually when something happened, my first step was to ask for help from our Plant Security people. At least they were available for 24 hours a day! So I called the Plant and asked for advice. The guard on duty did not have an immediate answer, but promised to call back shortly. After ten minutes he called to report a recommendation just received from the Animal Control Services, to whom he addressed my request. To start with, the guard reported, Animal Control stated that "*they do not do skunks*." However they did offered an advice: "Get bread crumbs and scatter them on the lawn, starting from the bush where the skunk disappeared, to the garden gate, and finally beyond. Leave the gate opened overnight. The skunk will probably find it's way out!"

I did as recommended, carefully trying to avoid immediate encounters with the skunk when scattering the bread.

Next morning I went outside to check the effectiveness of the previous day's measures. Well…, some crumbs had disappeared. The skunk was not in sight either. But then my neighbor, a retired lady, came out from her house and approached the fence, which separated our lots.

She started the conversation by saying, "Do you know that you have skunks in your back yard?" I was surprised that she knew, and I related her the story to the previous day's events that I experienced. "The problem is that you do not have 'a skunk,' " she continued, "but you have a FAMILY of skunks!" she revealed the frightening truth. Apparently when I was out of town, a female skunk gave birth to two babies in my back yard, most probably under my porch. Since then, the skunk family lived in my yard. The neighbors watched them playing on my lawn every evening. The skunks looked cute, but the neighbors were seriously afraid that the skunk family would cross the fence and invade their yard. My neighbors always silently disapproved of the messy state of my garden. Now the skunk story was related to me, also with a tone of strong disapproval.

Now I realized that it is a GENUINE problem. How to get rid of a family of skunks?! By now, they probably thought of my back yard as their own home!

When I went to work at the Plant I asked my secretary to look for some help. She was a very energetic and enthusiastic woman, and at once began calling various pertinent institutions around the county, and beyond. It was not easy, however, to obtain any information and advise on what to do

with the skunks, as their weapons are so unique. By the end of the work day I had received only a single advice from the Animal Control Agency of the neighboring county as a potential solution to the problem: "Buy a wild animal trap-cage, cover it by a black plastic bag (skunks like darkness), and put inside the cage a fresh, fried chicken (the best is Kentucky chicken!). Leave everything overnight."

After reading these instructions I asked "And then what?!" It looked as though the recommended solution was not bad for any wild animal, EXCEPT skunks. The Animal Control, which 'DOES NOT DO SKUNKS,' evidently did not realize how unique a weapon this animal comes equipped with! If trapped, it is still very dangerous! Furthermore, I did not have just one skunk, but the entire family!!

The "advice" was clearly inapplicable. I started calling around, to all friends and acquaintances, asking them to refer to me anyone who might have had some experience with skunks.

By the end of the next day a recommendation arrived. It was passed to me by a forester, and this time it sounded quite reasonable and feasible. "Skunks are nocturnal animals. They do not like light, they do not like noise, and are sensitive to smells. In particular they do not like the smell of camphor. You have to fight them psychologically!"

Shortly thereafter I went to the drug store and purchased four pounds of moth flakes. The contents of the package were duly spread on and under my porch, on the lawn, and under the juniper bushes where I had seen the skunk. A loudly playing radio was installed overnight on the porch. The porch lights were turned on, and a few more lamps were added around the yard. All gates to the yard were left widely opened overnight.

Later, my neighbors complained that they had not been able to sleep, as the music was too loud. However the cure for skunks was miraculously effective! Nobody has seen a skunk in my back yard during several following years. Then, when a family of cats adopted me and made my back yard their home skunks were often seen, helping themselves with the cat food.



The mother-cat suspiciously investigates a newcomer, apparently threatening to help himself with the cat food. My stuffed skunk neither moved nor smelled, so after awhile it was ignored.

While visiting Alaska, which is full of wild animals, I bought a skunk hide. It was flat, well tanned and did not at all smell as skunks. It contained the head and tail and part of legs. When returning home, I purchased a piece of black plush fabric, pillow stuffing, and glass eyes. In a few evening work hours, I created a great "stuffed skunk". The fabric served for the skunk belly. A stiff wire elevated up skunk's beautiful longhair tail.

One summer evening a few days later, my friend was supposed to come to my house to pick me up for some evening activities. I told him on the phone to come and enter the house, as I would leave my entrance door open. So I did, and put my created skunk in the hallway. I watched what happened next. Entering the hallway, my friend totally froze. Then he slammed the door and started dramatically yelling that I left it open and a skunk entered the house. Then, when I did not respond, he finally slowly opened the door again and started looking more attentively: the skunk did not move! Then finally he understood that it was my innocent prank-trap for himself!!



Real skunk eating cat food on my porch

My encounters with "real" skunks were unfortunately not entirely over. One beautiful evening in summer of year 2000, a semi-wild hungry cat came to the porch, where I fed my cats. When I tried to separate him from my cats he jumped at me, grabbed my hand, scratched and bitted it in several places. The blood was all over. I called the Emergency; they advised to come right away to get proper dressing and shots – antibiotics and tetanus. They also immediately advised to rent a cage-trap in

order to attempt to catch this cat and check it for rabies. If the cat would not be examined and stated negative, I faced the rabies vaccine shots next.

I got the cage, installed it on my porch, and put bait in it. Nothing happened during long hours. In the next morning I almost fainted, when instead of this malefactor cat I saw a small skunk inside the cage!! This poor stupid animal got trapped and of course, since it was angry hopelessly fighting to escape, entire porch was already abundantly sprayed. A big skunk would not be so dangerous in this cage, as it would not be able to raise its tail in the tight space. Unfortunately this small skunk succeeded this quite well. The smell around was horrible.

I called the local Animal Control. In response, I was told, "we do not do skunks". Well, I have known this before. They suggested calling a trapper, who apparently might have helped, and they gave me his phone number. I left a message on his answering machine, as nobody answered. He never called me back.



A small skunk trapped in the cage

I desperately started calling friends. It was a Sunday; finally a few of them were home and willing to help. They brought a large plastic tarp. The plan was to throw it over the cage. The next step was to drag the cage down from the porch, then drag it outside my garden, and finally open the cage and release the skunk. All steps looked easy, but this small skunk seamed to have an unlimited amount of his ugly weapon. At each attempt to approach with the tarp, a new fountain of stinky spray appeared around. Unluckily, one of my friends got a direct "shot". Her shorts and blouse were irreparable. With a garden hose we tried to wash her—first with a lot of water, then her bare arms and legs with tomato sauce. Fortunately I had a big can at home. Apparently, tomatoes are the best neutralizers of the abominable skunk smell.

After about one hour of struggle, the operation of skunk release was finally successful. The skunk quickly disappeared in the bushes outside my garden. The tarp, as well as a part of our clothes, was trashed. The trap-cage in a big plastic bag went back to the Animal Control station. I would not dare to repeat the experience to attempt catching the culprit-cat risking getting another skunk in the cage. I took a big risk by deciding not to get rabies vaccine, though. My assumption that the cat was not sick fortunately for me happened to be correct. This cat appeared on my porch a few days later, ready for another supper….

Minden, Nevada, April 1996, November 2005
Revised in November 2005