

The Eastern Striped Skunk, common throughout the United States, is our only native Ohio skunk. They are members of the Mephitidae family, which is Latin for “stench.” The word “skunk” is one of the few Algonquin Indian words to enter the English language.

Striped skunks are extremely adaptable and found nearly everywhere in Ohio: woodlands, meadows, suburban yards, urban alleys, and our very own Cincinnati Parks. Skunks prefer denning in transition areas or edge zones, where open fields meet woodlands, or thick shrubs meet manicured lawns. In winter, they hunker down to wait out the snow and ice.

While capable of digging their own winter burrows, skunks more often seek homes in spaces that belong to someone else: beneath porches or decks. Skunks that live away from residential areas will often take over burrows dug and deserted by other animals, such as groundhogs or foxes. Once colder weather sets in, skunks prepare their dens by blocking off the entrance to their burrows with leaves and grass to keep the cold air out.

But don’t think our skunks aren’t active during winter. Settled into its winter home, the striped skunk becomes dormant during the coldest parts of our winters but does not enter a full state of hibernation. Instead, skunks enter a state of torpor – a type of deep sleep from which they awake from time to time to forage. Unlike many rodents and birds, which hoard food for the cold months, skunks spend the fall eating as much as possible so they can stay warm during mid-winter dormancy. This binge eating builds up thick layers of fat underneath the skin, which the skunk metabolizes during its dormant period. While the fat keeps them warm, they continue to forage for food through the winter until they are snowed in.

Just in time for Valentine’s Day, we will see more skunk activity in February, signaling the end of their dormancy as skunks emerge seeking mates. After breeding, both males and females seek to rebuild fat reserves, having lost, on average, about 30 percent of their body weight during winter. Unfortunately, skunks have poor eye sight and are so focused on finding a mate and food at this time that they may meet their demise when crossing roads. Keep an eye out for these hungry, pining critters in the upcoming months!