Skunks

Texas has just one species of opossum, one species of raccoon, and one species of armadillo. With five species of skunks, that makes them kind of special. The most well-known skunk characteristic is, of course, its ability to spray. The active ingredient of the foul-smelling discharge is a sulphide known as n-butyl mercaptan, which can sting the skin, cause temporary blindness, and produce a pungent, gagging odor that is unmistakably skunk. They are able to direct the discharge 15 feet or more with highly coordinated control. Their breeding season lasts throughout February and March, during which time males embark on nighttime quests to find mates -- and if they must cross a highway, they just might not make it.

Rabies and Skunks

Skunks are one of the leading carriers of rabies in Texas, and the Texas Department of State Health Services is doing something about it. In January, planes dropped doses of oral rabies vaccines across parts of 17 counties in an attempt to fight skunk rabies. The vaccine packets are about the size of fast-food ketchup packages, are coated in fishmeal, and dropped in rural areas in the hopes that skunks will bite the packets to receive the vaccine. The department has had success with a similar program for coyotes and foxes. Laura Robinson, Director of the Program, states, “We’ve been able to eliminate the coyote and gray fox strains of rabies from Texas. We continue to evaluate whether the same method can help eliminate rabies in skunks in our test area in east-central Texas.” In 2014, almost half of the 1,132 positive rabies cases in Texas came from skunks.

North Texas’ Most Common Skunk

The striped skunk (Mephitis mephitis) is the most common skunk in Texas and North America and can be found all across the state. This species is marked with a narrow white stripe on the nose, a white crown, and white stripes that extend down the back. The markings can be highly variable, with some striped skunks appearing almost all white or all black. They are omnivorous, with a diet that includes insects, rodents, birds, fruits, and vegetable matter. Striped skunks were bred for the fur industry in the early 1900s. Alternate name: polecat.