

## Alberta's Skunk Issue

- Reports that skunk numbers are increasing in both communities and the country are rising. Skunks are being reported in the west country where they have typically not been before
- This issue is directly related to human activity – skunks are not the bad guy in this issue
- The following information was gathered over 32 years of running a wildlife hospital and education centre, studies of research completed by various institutions and individuals and consultation with the retired Alberta Director of Wildlife who completed his Masters in skunks.
- MRWC took over the skunk issue 3 years ago in Red Deer and at first was trapping and relocating. Our predecessors had been trapping and euthanizing and increasingly landowners didn't like that and were asking that the skunks be relocated.
- MRWC hired a staff member to take charge of wildlife conflict calls. Her research brought to light that removing skunks was actually increasing the problem and skunk numbers.
- Two years ago the Centre began using eviction techniques and education instead of trapping and moving. Litters of 8-10 were the norm at the time MRWC took over the skunk issue. Two years into the project the following have been observed:
  1. Litter sizes have decreased to 2-6
  2. Skunks that are evicted from one yard are not moving to the neighbour's yard
  3. Areas of the City that have changed their yards are not reporting on-going problems

## Human Habits That Are Changing the Skunk Numbers

- Cat rescue organizations and other caring people believe that to help the feral cat population they must leave out feeding stations. These feeding stations feed more than cats unfortunately. Skunks, crows, ravens, mice and other wildlife are drawn into communities to access the free and easily accessible food. Depending on the location of the community these feeding stations can also bring in larger predators such as coyote and bear.
- These well-meaning animal lovers are actually hurting other species by trying to help cats. There are other methods to help the feral cat population crisis.
- Yards that have places for skunks to den such as sheds, porches and steps offer perfect habitat for skunks. Cluttered yards are skunk heaven.
- Landowners leave out other food sources such as open compost bins, pet food, heavily laden fruit trees and garbage.
- When pest control companies and animal services simply trap, relocate or euthanize skunks but don't deal with the reasons that brought them there in the first place the area will continue to attract other skunks.
- All wildlife responds to good habitat and food sources so those that have found plentiful food and shelter are programmed to have larger litters. When a female moves into a territory that other skunks have been removed from and find plentiful food and shelter litter sizes goes up increasing the skunk population.
- If an older seasoned male skunk who holds a territory is trapped and removed research shows that up to five younger males may come in and take over the emptied territory. Once again increasing the skunk population.

- So removing skunks and not changing the root cause of them coming actually increases numbers either through more males or larger litters
- Communities using garbage bags instead of animal proof containers invite skunks, cats, crows, ravens, mice ,etc
- Communities that have growing numbers of cats, skunks, mice, etc also then invite the larger predators such as coyote, wolves, cougar and bear
- Relocation is not the answer. Relocating skunks into the “country” simply puts the skunks in someone else’s backyard and is spreading skunk territory where it traditionally never been before

## Solutions

- Education and support to change the things that attract skunks into yards and communities
- Garbage bins instead of open garbage and plastic bags in communities
- A bylaw to prevent free roaming cats
- A bylaw to prevent feeding of wildlife and feral cats
- Multifaceted approach to the feral cat issue. ***This will also help to solve the disappearance of the songbird population that has reached crisis proportion - free roaming cats are the leading cause***
- Stop removing and relocating skunks as a solution
- Education to reduce fear of skunks and learn to live with them
- Teamwork among communities, individuals and community organizations, animal rescue groups, government agencies