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Experts estimate high number of skunks this year

Frank Vaisvilas

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Get ready to hold your noses — skunk season is upon us

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When Niki Ramirez's miniature pinscher dog was sprayed by a skunk outside her Lansing home last summer it took about three days to air out the house.

"He stunk up the whole house the minute he came in," she said. "I would have bathed him outside had it not been dark out."

Ramirez's experience might become a more common scenario for Southland and Chicago area residents this summer, according to wildlife experts.

Rob Erickson, an animal trapper who works with forest preserve district officials in urban coyote management and who wrote a book called "Innovative Skunk Control," warns about the impending skunk nuisance.

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He said skunk population levels rise and fall within 10- to 12-year cycles.

"We're at the high spot, now," Erickson said.

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He expects the skunk population to begin declining next year or the year after because of disease and eventually come to the point when they're scarce .

But they'll be plentiful this year and spring is mating season for skunks, which can have litters of up to 12 babies.

Erickson said it will be around the Fourth of July when the new skunks will be about six weeks old and start experimenting with their weapon — a very strong odor that can be sprayed up to 10 feet from anal glands.

"People will start smelling them everywhere," he said.

And by the fall, Erickson said, skunks will start digging for grub to prepare for winter.

"They'll just decimate lawns," he said.

Erickson said there's not much homeowners can do to keep skunks away but one key deterrent is to get rid of their bird feeder if they have one.

Skunk population levels vary by neighborhood, according to Chris Anchor, senior wildlife biologist for the Cook County Forest Preserve District.

He said the animal is attracted to open areas and likely will be more active in neighborhoods close to golf courses. Anchor said residents near wooded areas likely will see fewer skunks but probably more raccoons.

To eliminate the chances of a skunk taking up residence, Anchor said, people should eliminate easily accessible sources of food and make finding shelter difficult. A skunk's favorite hiding spot is an opening between a home's foundation and a concrete stoop inside the pea gravel area.

Rick Mata, an animal trapper with Advantage Wildlife Control based in Lockport, has seen his share of skunk invasions in recent years.

"It doesn't take much for them to take over a neighborhood," he said.

Mata recalls one case when he caught 15 skunks in an area behind a woman's home in Crest Hill. He said part of what had been attracting them was a neighbor about five houses down who had been feeding wildlife.

If a skunk takes up residence in a home, the best thing a homeowner can do is call a trapper rather than trying to trap it themselves, Erickson said.

Once trapped it is illegal for a skunk to be released elsewhere, Anchor said. He said state law requires that all caught skunks must be euthanized because they're one of two animals highly susceptible to contracting rabies which can spread to other animals. The other animals that must be euthanized to stop the spread of rabies are bats.

But Anchor said skunks do have a couple of redeeming qualities, such as adding to biodiversity and being highly efficient insect eaters.

But to most people, like Ramirez, they're just a nuisance.

She was able to remove the odor from her home in just a few days because she knew what to do being employed as a business development manager for Rainbow International, a cleaning and restoration service company with a franchise in Orland Park.

John Gurtler, owner of that company, said skunk odors can sometimes linger in a home for several weeks. He said it's difficult to remove the oily, odorous substance from a pet that has been "skunked" and the pet can contaminate other areas of the house, especially fabric surfaces.

Gurtler said one home remedy pet owners can try is to mix one quart of hydrogen peroxide, one-fourth cup of baking soda and one teaspoon of liquid soap and then apply it to their dog or cat. He said they leave the solutions on for five minutes, rinse and repeat if necessary to reduce the odor.

"It's something you need to act on fast to keep the smell from attaching itself to fabrics inside the home," Ramirez said. "Though I was lucky and acted right away some people don't know what to do. Next thing you know their dog is rubbing themselves all over the couch and rug and they need professional help to remove the odor."

Frank Vaisvilas is a freelance reporter for the Daily Southtown.

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