

THE SKUNK: A BOON OR PEST?

In Michigan the skunk ranks next to the muskrat as our most important fur resource. However, in the following discussion this fact will be ignored, as it is desirable to evaluate the creature purely on the basis of its habits. There are many local areas where skunks are plentiful and yet are not trapped for fur. In these places the modest value of his pelt is no advantage to the animal in his public relations. On the other hand we must do him the justice to get rid of any bigoted ideas connected with the fact that the species is primarily carnivorous. There is an innate tendency in most of us to impute a tinge of immorality to the flesh-eating habit. The writings of some of our early american naturalists are colored with the same idea. Whether we like it or not we must accept the principle that populations of carnivores and herbivores have "grown up" together in this world and long-standing adjustments have rendered them absolutely interdependent. A fox eating a rabbit is no more vicious than a cow munching away in a clover field.

Predatory species on the farm not infrequently become unpleasantly involved as a result of the undeniable palatability of the domestic hen. The skunk is no exception, but the amount of damage that is done by the animal is a subject of some controversy. One farmer reported to me that he had lost ten chickens in one night. A clucking hen with about a dozen young was roosting on the ground under a small lean-to shelter. Hearing a disturbance in the middle of the night the owner investigated and found

that ten of the young chickens were either dead or missing. Several steel traps were set and baited with some of the dead chickens. On the following night two skunks were taken in the traps. It was assumed that the skunks were the original culprits. Considering the evidence, I believe that this assumption was correct, although of course there is a possibility of error. Another farmer told of finding a skunk in a poultry house feeding on the body of a freshly-killed young chicken. The skunk had entered by a door nearly at ground level. Cases of real or alleged skunk depredations on poultry are not rare. It is common, however, for a farmer who has raised chickens for many years where skunks are common to report no damage at all.

The W. K. Kellogg Farm near Battle Creek is owned and operated by Michigan State College for purposes of experimentation and demonstration. Several thousand chickens are reared here on open range each year. During the winter they are kept in two large poultry houses. The Michigan Department of Conservation, through the Game Division, made a two-year study of the wildlife of this farm and, incidentally, investigated the relationships of skunks and other animals to the poultry plant. Some of the results of this investigation are given here.

The brooder houses at the Kellogg Farm were placed in rows in an alfalfa field. The hay was mowed around the houses but strips of alfalfa

were left growing. While the chickens were very young they were kept in small fenced inclosures around the brooder houses, but when sufficiently developed they were allowed to run throughout the field which was ~~surround-~~ed with a poultry netting fence. In the early summer of 1936, after the chickens had been turned out, skunks were often discovered in the range about nightfall and numerous chicken remains could be found which had obviously been worked upon by the skunks. In addition, on one occasion an employee of the farm found two skunks chasing a full-grown hen inside ~~aspen~~ near one of the large poultry houses. One of the animals was shot.

In field work done nearly every evening after sundown I several times found old females and four or five young skunks in the chicken range. On one occasion I happened upon an "air-tight" case of damage. It was just dusk and all the chickens were on the roost except a very few stragglers. In the edge of one of the strips of alfalfa an adult skunk was eating the head from a still-warm plump broiler. An autopsy of the chicken showed that it was probably a perfectly healthy specimen. This appeared to be good proof that a skunk could and would, at times, catch a chicken in the open. About the middle of August, twelve box traps were set in the range by the brooder houses and baited with fish. On the first night nine skunks and a barn rat were caught and one of the remaining traps was sprung! Seven of the skunks were young individuals, just weaned, which were learning to care for themselves. All of the animals were

marked as individuals and liberated in a pile of stumps about 300 yards from the poultry yard. Several were subsequently retaken back at the brooderhouses.

A thorough investigation was made of the situation and every effort made to discover the true extent of the damage done by skunks to this poultry plant. Observations on the habits of the chickens themselves proved to be very profitable. The entrances to the brooder houses were windows about 2 feet above the ground. It is certain that no skunk ever found its way into one of these houses. Many chickens roosted in the windows or outside on the covers over the mash troughs. These birds were all from 2 1/2 to 4 feet above the ground. There was no indication that any of these individuals ever fell prey to the skunks.

Among several thousand chickens it is inevitable that there should be some diseased individuals which would die in the open. It was noticed that nearly every evening several sick chickens would be roosting outside the brooder houses on the ground. A few could usually be found on low blocks of wood. Birds that were very ill appeared to lack the inclination to seek a higher perch. With a flashlight many of these chickens were caught and examined and the healthy vigorous individuals were nearly always perched on the highest available roost. Birds on the ground were almost invariably thin and those on low blocks

were usually in poor condition. Female skunks that were lactating needed plenty of food to nourish their broods and found an easily available supply in the dead chickens in the range. They also utilized those that roosted on the ground and were so nearly dead that they were easily caught. In a few cases healthy chickens were pursued and, at least once, one was caught.

Skunk damage was very small here in comparison with what might have been expected from the conditions. This poultry plant housed more than three thousand chickens, and the number of skunks, all of which had easy access to the range, was very high. Many of the animals present were females faced with the necessity for providing with food a litter of young hungry for fresh meat and the calcium from bones. It is conceivable that these scavenging skunks in one way served a useful purpose by removing disease carriers among the chickens more quickly than would otherwise have been the case.

There is good evidence that under ordinary conditions many skunks will not attack live chickens. One farmer tells me that his captive skunks would not molest a live chicken that was placed in the pen with them. When the chicken was killed, however, they fed upon it readily. On three different occasions at the Kellogg Farm a skunk was unknowingly shut into one of the large poultry houses when the building was closed for

the night. In the morning these animals were discovered and driven out. In no case was any harm done to the chickens. It appears that certain individual skunks will, when the proper opportunity is presented, take to killing chickens; however, this is very probably exceptional rather than the rule. If chickens are shut in at night when young, and provided with perches several feet off the ground as they get older, little trouble need be anticipated even where skunks are very numerous. The sound policy probably is to manage the chickens rather than the skunks. The alternative; a local extermination of these animals, is more trouble and very likely to be unsuccessful. It should also be remembered that, in general, every animal carcass that is found that has been fed upon by another animal does not represent a kill. What may at first sight appear to have been an act of violence may merely represent the peaceful removal of a source of flies and bad odors.

Skunks are inordinately fond of all kinds of insects. Under some conditions they will eat yellow-jackets, hornets, and bumblebees. They appear usually to do this when the temperature is low enough to render the bee in question incompetent to defend himself. It is not surprising that hives of honey bees with drones and dead workers lying outside are an attraction to skunks. These animals may visit a hive regularly to clean up the dead bees and they sometimes dig up the ground

the percentage may well be less than this, as most of the duck nests are



Flashlight photo of a chicken nearly dead from coccidiosis. These birds did not go to roost and were eaten by skunks.



Digging out skunk burrows is poor economy for trappers. It gets mostly females and cuts down next year's crop. Where control is the object the method is of service.



The skunk is of immense value to agriculture. Its sins are spectacular—
its benefits easily overlooked.

this. Egbert has a cut of
I want this pint of L.A.