

Love is in the air for skunks, too

By Lisa Bloch

It's Valentine's Day and love is in the air. That includes the unmistakable smell of "eau de skunk" throughout Marin, as these wildlife residents are in the midst of mating season. Just like Pepé Le Pew, always on a quest for love, only to be thwarted by his noxious odor, male skunks may fight over females, spraying each other in the process, and female skunks may spray males they don't like. This also means your curious dog may get caught in the crossfire if skunks aren't given time to get away.

According to WildCare, "A skunk will typically give a lot of warning before spraying. He will raise his tail and shake it warningly. He will stamp his feet and turn his head and rear end toward you in a 'U' shape. Unless taken completely by surprise, he will give these warnings and wait until the last possible second before deploying the 'nuclear option' of spraying. A skunk generally prefers to exit the scene with no spraying involved."

Unfortunately, dogs don't read all the warning signs that skunks give, and actually, a raised and waving tail may look like an invitation to sniff. Dogs tend to rush right up to skunks, as they would to another dog standing there with their tail up, and this is why dogs so often get sprayed. The skunk sees a perceived predator approaching and feels like they have no other options.

You can give skunks a head start — and protect your dog — by giving warnings before letting your dog outside, especially at night. Turn on yard lights, make a bit of noise, and wait a couple beats before releasing your dog. That way, any skunks (that have poor eyesight, by the way) will get the picture and get a move on.

If your dog does get sprayed, fear not. A tried and true method is to mix 1-quart hydrogen peroxide, a quarter cup baking soda, and 1 teaspoon liquid

soap and work them into the sprayed areas (using gloves). Rinse with water and repeat if necessary (be careful around the eyes).

Skunks are primarily nocturnal, spending the night sniffing the ground in search of insects, rodents, garden pests like slugs and snails, and occasionally fruit. If these forays bring them into our yards, they may dig in gardens or lawns to feed on root-infesting insects. If you make the mistake of leaving pet food or unsecured garbage out at night, you are likely going to attract skunks (and other unwelcome guests like raccoons and coyotes).

Some people insist they have a “skunk problem” simply because they smell the tell-tale scent but usually, skunks are just passing through and their scent will eventually follow them. If you think you do have skunks living in or under your house, contact WildCare’s Living with Wildlife Hotline at 415-456-7283 for tips on how to get them to vacate the premises.

So, enjoy Valentine’s Day, and remember that while Pepé Le Pew may cause a big stink, he and his paramours are an important part of our thriving ecosystem.

Lisa Bloch is the marketing and communications director at Marin Humane which contributes Tails of Marin articles and welcomes animal-related questions and stories about the people and animals in our community. Go to marinhumane.org, find us on social media @marinhumane, or email lbloch@marinhumane.org.