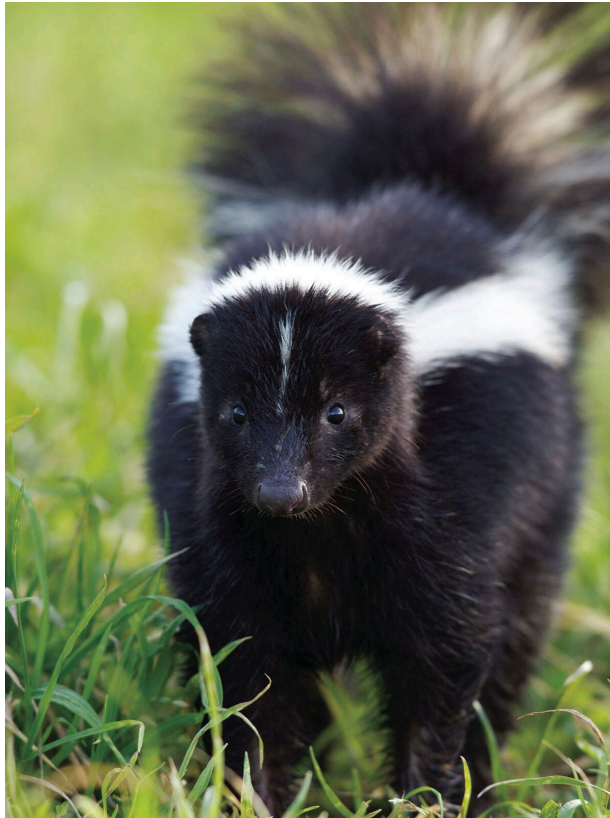


Writers on the Range: When a skunk goes after your garden

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Skunks love autumn as our backyard gardens fill up with ripe vegetables. But in my northern New Mexico corn patch, that meant a determined skunk chowing down on ears of corn every night. What followed next was a conundrum: I wanted it gone but didn't know how to make that happen.

My initial attempt, spreading coyote-urine crystals from the hardware store, failed to repel the raids. Then a Norteno gardener friend advised hanging mothballs in bags on the fence. Nope, no effect.

My plumber friend said he got rid of a big skunk family that took up residence under his mother's house by borrowing a trap from the county's agriculture extension agent. He used cat food as bait — but all he caught was cats. Switching to fresh eggshells, he said he caught the entire skunk family, one striped marauder at a time.

A farmer neighbor's advice was similar: "Get a Havahart trap." I got one and the skunk ended up inside, but then what?

I called Taos County Animal Control. The agent said they don't handle skunks and gave me two options: a private critter-control outfit or dropping it off myself "somewhere in the mountains." And oh yes, be sure to cover the trap with a tarp when you approach to block possible spray, and minimize alarming the animal because you know why.

Not wanting to release the skunk in the yard where it might spray my dogs, I recruited an agile friend to carry the cage about 400 yards away to a fallow field protected by a conservation easement. The corn-chomper was back the next night.

Then I read on the Havahart company website that skunks should be released at least 10 miles away. Somebody said that skunks had been dumped west of me across the Rio Grande Gorge, in an area colloquially known as *otra banda*, a mix of private and public land.

This turned out to be a terrible idea. When I floated that alternative with a Facebook Taos Farm and Garden group, I quickly learned that dumping a skunk across the gorge was anything but welcome. "Not near my backyard!" was the reaction.

The idea of dumping the skunk also led to accusations of animal cruelty because I'd be removing the animal "from his family and home range." A few people had an easy solution, though not one I liked: "Just shoot it."

What seemed doable was that early suggestion to drop off the skunk "somewhere" in the mountains, and I knew of some Bureau of Land Management land that included a National Conservation Area for wildlife.

But first I called the Taos BLM office to check. The clerk commiserated with my garden losses, said they have no policy on this issue, and directed me to the New Mexico Department of Game and Fish. The main office in Santa Fe verified that trapping a skunk was legal on my own property and referred me to the local Taos game wardens.

They said because skunks aren't regulated as "non-game animals," they could be moved to public lands where the BLM and the Forest Service have no restrictions on freeing trapped skunks. A solution at last.

So, wrapping the cage in a tarp, I drove the skunk 10 miles away to its new home, gave it time to adjust, and then opened the trap door. Out it bolted, taking off at a fast waddle across the sagebrush field. I hoped to never see it — or any member of its family — again.

Out of an abundance of caution, though, I set the trap again, because skunks are often seen at night traveling along the dry acequias (irrigation ditches), in my neighborhood. I learned that skunks have competitors for sardine bait — this one a tabby housecat without a collar.

I let the cat go, and a week later, we're eating corn without competition. Our trap still sits in the corn patch, unbaited but ready, just in case, though I know what to do now: *Que sera, sera*.

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