

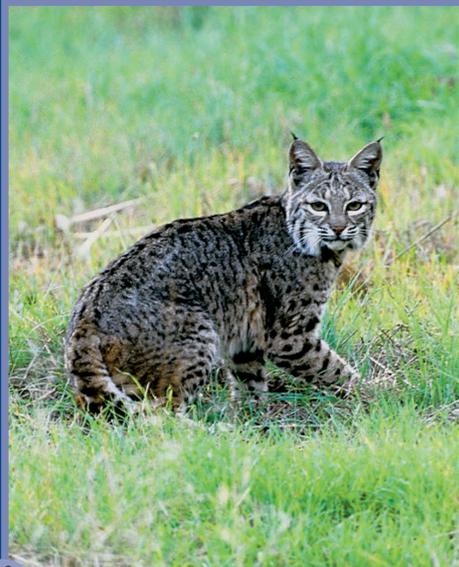
# ILLINOIS FURBEARERS



 **badger** *Taxidea taxus*



 **beaver** *Castor canadensis*



 **bobcat** *Lynx rufus*



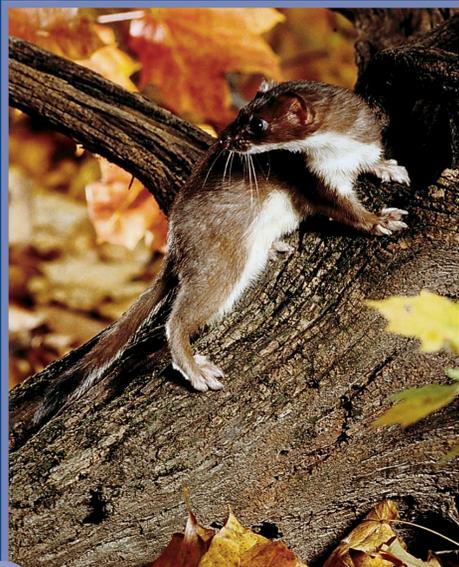
 **coyote** *Canis latrans*



 **gray fox** *Urocyon cinereoargenteus*



 **least weasel** *Mustela nivalis*



 **long-tailed weasel** *Mustela frenata*



 **mink** *Neovison vison*



 **muskrat** *Ondatra zibethicus*



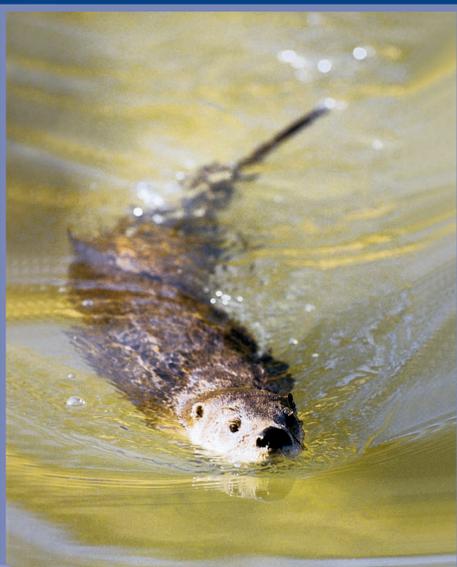
 **Virginia opossum** *Didelphis virginiana*



 **raccoon** *Procyon lotor*



 **red fox** *Vulpes vulpes*



 **river otter** *Lontra canadensis*



 **striped skunk** *Mephitis mephitis*

## What is a furbearer?

Few dictionaries define "furbearer." This term is used mostly by professional wildlife biologists. It refers to species of mammals which are traditionally hunted or trapped — usually for their valuable furs. In Illinois, 14 species are classified as furbearers. Twelve may be harvested legally during certain times of the year. The bobcat and river otter are protected year-round.

More than 75 state, federal and international laws apply to the hunting and trapping of furbearers in Illinois. Such laws set standards for animal welfare and place limits on hunting and trapping so that animals are not endangered by these activities.

IDNR supports regulated hunting and trapping because these activities help to keep furbearer populations at acceptable levels, reduce property damage caused by furbearers, raise funds for the conservation of all wildlife and obtain a wide range of materials and products for human use.

## This poster was made possible by:



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# ILLINOIS FURBEARERS

## coyote *Canis latrans*

**Range:** Common throughout Illinois.

**Habitat:** Coyotes are found in a wide variety of *habitats*, including urban and suburban areas.

**Habits:** The area inhabited by a coyote is often as much as 20 to 30 miles in diameter. This "territory" is not exclusive — several coyotes might share parts or all of it. Coyotes tend to be solitary during certain parts of the year and social at other times. Groups usually consist of mated pairs or females with their offspring.

Coyotes use a variety of barks, yips and howls to communicate. They also communicate by marking their travels with urine, feces and gland secretions. Coyotes are most active from dusk to dawn, but they are sometimes seen at other times of the day.

**Food:** Common *prey* includes rabbits, mice and voles. They also eat insects, fruits, berries and carrion (dead animals). Adult white-tailed deer are usually safe from coyotes but fawns are susceptible, especially when they are less than three to four weeks of age. Coyotes living near residential areas have been known to eat pet food, domestic cats and occasionally small breeds of dogs.

**Reproduction:** Most breeding occurs in late February or early March. An average of five to seven pups is born in late April or May. Pups are full-grown and capable of breeding at nine to ten months of age.

**Conservation:** The coyote's future as a part of Illinois' landscape is all but guaranteed by its high reproductive rate and ability to adapt to a wide variety of *habitats*. Ongoing conservation efforts include monitoring the statewide coyote population and providing opportunities for regulated hunting and trapping.

Foothold (sometimes called leghold) traps are the only effective devices for capturing coyotes alive. Laws prohibit the use of traps with teeth, limit legal sizes and types of traps and require people to check their traps daily. Young trappers must attend training sessions and pass a test before they are allowed to purchase a license. These and other laws help to balance the need for trapping with the need to do it responsibly.



T, H

## bobcat *Lynx rufus*

**Range:** Bobcats are abundant in the southern quarter of the state and increasingly common along the Illinois, Mississippi and Kaskaskia rivers. They are found sporadically in the remainder of the state.

**Habitat:** Forested or wooded areas provide the best *habitat*.

**Habits:** Viewed by many as a "wilderness species," the bobcat's secretive habits allow it to live surprisingly close to people. It is most active at night and in the twilight hours of dusk and dawn. Daytime movements are rare except during mid-winter.

An adult male's *home range* averages 14 square miles. Females have *home ranges* that average 5 square miles. The *home range* of one bobcat overlaps that of its neighbors, resulting in an average density of 1 bobcat for every 1.5 square miles in southern Illinois.

Bobcats are curious animals, zig-zagging to investigate objects that catch their attention. They usually move at a walk or trot. Dirt roads, railways and game trails are common travel routes between resting and hunting areas.

**Food:** Common *prey* includes rabbits, squirrels, mice, voles, rats and birds.

**Reproduction:** The mating season peaks in February but can last from early January through June. Most litters arrive in late April or early May. Litter size varies from one to six but averages two or three kittens.

**Conservation:** Practices that help to maintain the health and productivity of forest communities are beneficial. Complete protection is seldom the best approach. Most of Illinois' forest communities evolved with frequent wildfires. Trees killed by wildfires created openings where sunlight reached the forest floor. These openings were essential for the healthy development of young oaks, hickories and other shade-intolerant trees. Many kinds of grasses, shrubs and vines also flourished in these areas. The result was a diverse ecosystem which bobcats prefer. Cutting trees can help to mimic this process now that wildfires are a thing of the past. For the best results, contact a state forester or private consultant for guidance on managing wooded areas for both economic and ecological values.



P

## beaver *Castor canadensis*

**Range:** Common throughout Illinois.

**Habitat:** Streams, rivers, marshes, swamps, lakes and ponds.

**Habits:** Beavers use sticks, mud and debris to build dams across streams and small rivers. Construction and repair activities peak during autumn. Pools which form behind the dams provide water deep enough to prevent ice from blocking access to underwater den entrances and food caches during winter. Pools also provide safety from predators and easy access to vegetation along shorelines.

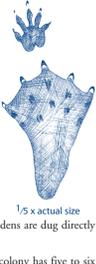
Beavers are most active at night. During the day, they use lodges or bank dens for shelter and protection. Lodges are dome-shaped piles of sticks and mud. Each has two or more underwater entrances that angle upward to a nest chamber located above the water line. Bank dens are dug directly into steep-sided shorelines of streams, rivers and lakes.

Groups of beavers that live together are called colonies. An average colony has five to six beavers. The range is two (usually a pair of adults) to 11 (usually a pair of adults and their offspring from the two most recent litters).

**Food:** The tender twigs and inner bark of trees like maple, willow and cottonwood are important foods, especially during fall and winter. Small trees are felled in a matter of minutes. During fall, beavers trim off the branches to convenient lengths, haul them to their den entrances and anchor them underwater. Called caches, these piles of branches provide a reliable food source when ice forms overhead. Aquatic plants, grasses and berries are part of their diet in spring and summer. Corn is a favorite food in the fall.

**Reproduction:** Beavers have one litter per year, usually in April, May or June. The average size is three or four, but some females have as many as six or seven young.

**Conservation:** Beavers are an important part of the ecosystem. Their dams help to create wetland habitat for fishes and wildlife. They also slow flood-waters and filter *silt*, which settles from the water when it reaches calm pools behind their dams. These benefits must be weighed against property damage that can occur when beavers cut commercial timber, landscaping and crops or when they build dams that flood farms, neighborhoods and roads. Regulated trapping helps to reach a balance between the needs of people and nature by keeping Illinois' beaver population at a healthy but tolerable level.



T

## badger *Taxidea taxus*

**Range:** Found throughout Illinois but most common in the northern one-half of the state.

**Habitat:** Vast prairies once dominated Illinois' landscape and provided excellent *habitat* for badgers. Today, nearly all of these areas are used for agricultural production. Badgers have adapted by making the most of remaining grasslands such as pastures, roadsides, idle farm fields, conservation areas and railroad rights-of-way.

**Habits:** In excellent *habitat*, badgers spend most of their time in an area one to two miles in diameter. They roam much larger areas where grasslands are small and scattered — often five square miles for females and 15 for males.

Adaptations for burrowing include a low profile, powerful front legs, long claws (up to two inches in length) and partial webbing between the toes of its front feet. Stiff hairs protrude from its ears to shield them from falling dirt. Each of its eyes can be protected by a clear membrane which closes over the cornea yet allows it to see.

Badgers are most active at night. They tend to live alone except when breeding or raising their young. Badgers do not *hibernate*, but they spend a lot of time sleeping in their burrows during periods of extreme cold. Burrows used to raise their young are as much as 30 feet long. A grass-lined nest chamber is located two to three feet underground.

**Food:** Common *prey* includes mice, ground squirrels, woodchucks (groundhogs), snakes and toads. They also eat rabbits, beetles, mulberries and carrion (dead animals).

**Reproduction:** Badgers have one litter per year, usually between late March and early June. Litter size varies from one to seven with an average of three young. Most females have their first litter at two years of age.

**Conservation:** Creating and maintaining grassland *habitats* are the most important conservation practices for this *species*. Some agricultural lands qualify for technical and financial assistance, especially if practices help to reduce *soil erosion*. Order a free copy of *Prairie Establishment and Landscaping* at [www.indreackids.com](http://www.indreackids.com) for tips on planting native grasses and wildflowers.



T

## mink *Neovison vison*

**Range:** Common throughout Illinois.

**Habitat:** Mink are found near rivers, lakes, streams, marshes and ponds. Shorelines with grass, brush, trees or *aquatic* plants, like cattails, provide good cover and abundant *prey*. They often use abandoned muskrat dens, brush piles and dry drainage *tiles* as resting sites and places to raise their young.

**Habits:** Mink are most active from dusk to dawn. Nearly all of their time is spent within 100 feet of the water's edge. Males travel extensively, moving from one temporary den to the next in an area as large as five square miles (3,200 acres). Females live in a much smaller area, usually 20-25 acres in size.

**Food:** Mink hunt for their *prey* in the water, on the shoreline and in nearby upland areas. Common *prey* includes frogs, fishes, mice, birds, crayfishes, rabbits and muskrats.

**Reproduction:** Mink produce a single litter per year. Litter size varies from two to seven with an average of four kits. Arriving in May, the kits start learning to hunt at six to eight weeks of age and can fend for themselves by late summer.

**Conservation:** Maintaining a border of grass, brush or trees along waterways helps to reduce erosion and provides excellent *habitat* for mink. Efforts to create and protect wetlands are important for thousands of organisms, including mink.

Most of the mink that are used for manufacturing fur coats are raised in captivity, where a pampered existence and generations of selective breeding provide the highest quality pelts. Wild mink are smaller, have coarser fur and come in a less-striking range of colors than their domestic cousins. Accordingly, their pelts are often used for the inside linings of fur or leather coats and cuffs or collars on cloth garments.

Fur is the most obvious product of trapping or raising mink. However, little goes to waste. Their "musk" is a key ingredient of high-quality cosmetic and soap perfumes. Shoe care products with "mink oil" have been a standard for generations. Meat and other body parts are ultimately used for manufacturing paints, tires, pet foods, lubricants, soaps and fertilizers through a process called *rendering*. The same holds true for most furbearers which are trapped or hunted in Illinois.



T

## long-tailed weasel *Mustela frenata*

**Range:** Found sporadically throughout Illinois.

**Habitat:** Long-tailed weasels are found in many types of *habitat* including forests, woodlands, thickets, drainage ditches and brushy *fenoscres*. They prefer areas with a permanent source of water and an abundance of rodents, their main *prey*.

**Habits:** The ecology of long-tailed weasels is linked to that of their *prey*. Where *prey* is abundant, male weasels live in an area 25 to 60 acres in size. *Home ranges* of 200 to 400 acres are more typical in areas where *prey* is scarce. Females occupy smaller home ranges than males and are more likely to move away from the area where they were born. Long-tailed weasels tend to be social in areas with good *habitat* and plentiful *prey*. Their behavior is comparatively solitary in areas where conditions are less favorable.

Long-tailed weasels leave their dens about an hour after sunset to search for food. They tend to follow regular hunting routes. Distances moved during their nightly excursions can vary with *habitat* quality, breeding status and weather conditions but average about 700 feet for males and half as much for females.

Males are larger (13-16 inches, 6-16 ounces) than females (11-14 inches, 3-9 ounces). The size difference allows males to kill rabbits and squirrels whereas females find it difficult to kill anything larger than a chipmunk.

**Food:** Small rodents, such as voles and mice, make up most of the long-tailed weasel's diet. Other food items include cottontail rabbits, chipmunks, rats, tree squirrels, ground squirrels, and ground-nesting birds and their eggs.

**Reproduction:** Long-tailed weasels produce a single litter per year with an average of four to five young. The young are usually born in April or May.

**Conservation:** Planting strips of grass along waterways provides *habitat* for weasels and their *prey* while helping to reduce *soil erosion*. Planting native trees or shrubs along *fenoscres* or in *windbreaks* is beneficial. Building rock piles or brush piles can provide important sites for weasels to hunt and raise their young.



T

## least weasel *Mustela nivalis*

**Range:** Found sporadically in the northern half of Illinois.

**Habitat:** Least weasels tend to be found in areas like meadows, grasslands, and river bottoms. They prefer areas with a permanent source of water and an abundance of rodents, their main *prey*.

**Habits:** Least weasels are most active at night. They live in an area as small as two to two and one-half acres where food is plentiful and as large as 37 to 65 acres where food is scarce. Like long-tailed weasels, they tend to follow regular hunting routes and cover only a small part of their *home range* during any given night. They seldom tolerate the presence of other least weasels except during the breeding season.

Males are larger (8-10 inches, 2-3 ounces) than females (7-9 inches, 1-2 ounces). The least weasel's tiny size and slender build are perfect for pursuing voles and mice in tunnels under the grass. However, this specialized diet has its drawbacks. A sudden crash in the abundance of *prey* can cause local die-offs of the least weasel. Fortunately, they have a high reproductive rate that makes up for a short life span (on average, less than a year) and allows them to re-colonize an area quickly when rodent populations recover.

Like the long-tailed weasel, the least weasel has a brown coat with yellow-tinted underparts from May to September. Its winter coat is entirely white and blends well with snow. This seasonal change provides year-round camouflage from predators such as hawks and owls.

**Food:** Voles and mice make up most of the least weasel's diet. Insects and ground-nesting birds are eaten occasionally.

**Reproduction:** Females may have two litters per year, especially when food is plentiful. Females born in the spring can breed during their first summer. A typical litter has four to five young.

**Conservation:** Creating and maintaining grassland *habitats* are the most important conservation practices for this *species*. Some agricultural lands qualify for technical and financial assistance, especially if practices help to reduce *soil erosion*. Building rock piles or brush piles can provide important sites for weasels to hunt and raise their young.



T

## gray fox *Urocyon cinereoargenteus*

**Range:** The gray fox occurs throughout Illinois where suitable *habitat* exists. It is most abundant in the west-central and southern parts of the state.

**Habitat:** The gray fox prefers forested, wooded and brushy areas. Typical den sites include rock formations, hollow logs or trees, burrows and brush piles.

**Habits:** The gray fox is most active from dusk to dawn. It can climb trees by using its front feet to grasp the trunk and its hind feet to push upward. Its ability to climb trees is usually among native *cattails* and useful for escaping enemies or finding foods like persimmons and wild grapes.

Usually shy and secretive, the gray fox can fight fiercely when necessary. It can run at a top speed of 26 miles per hour for short distances. The abundance of local populations varies greatly among areas and over time but seldom exceeds three to five gray foxes per square mile. Declines in local populations are sometimes linked to outbreaks of canine distemper in other *species*, including raccoons, striped skunks, coyotes and domestic dogs. The gray fox is especially susceptible to canine distemper and seldom recovers once it contracts the disease.

**Food:** Rabbits and rodents make up the bulk of its diet. Corn, grapes, berries and fruits like persimmons can be important foods at certain times of the year.

**Reproduction:** The gray fox has a single litter per year, usually in late March or April. Litter size varies from one to ten pups with an average of three to five. The young are able to survive on their own by late summer or early fall.

**Conservation:** Maintaining and managing wooded areas are important conservation measures for the gray fox.

Legal seasons for regulated hunting and trapping occur in late fall and winter. This period coincides with the time when pelts are most valuable and young animals are no longer dependent on their mothers' care.



T, H

## red fox *Vulpes vulpes*

**Range:** Found throughout Illinois but most abundant in the northern two-thirds of the state.

**Habitat:** Red foxes prefer grasslands and other open areas. They visit agricultural fields, especially those that are idle or located near marshes, *fenoscres*, pastures, drainage ditches, woodlots and other sources of permanent cover. Reports of red foxes living in residential areas have increased during recent years.

**Habits:** Burrows dug by woodchucks, badgers or other animals are common den sites, as are abandoned or little-used buildings. Adults usually stay within a mile of their den while raising pups. At other times of the year, they live in an area five to ten miles in diameter. Juveniles usually leave their parents in the fall and have been known to travel as far as 100 miles before they settle into a new home.

Red foxes are most active at night. They sometimes travel the same paths over and over, creating worn trails. They stop frequently to mark their travels by urinating on prominent objects or depositing feces or gland secretions.

**Food:** Rodents and rabbits make up about 60 percent of the fox's diet. Other foods include birds, carrion (dead animals) and insects.

**Reproduction:** Mating takes place from December to March but peaks in January. Most litters are born in late March or early April. Litter size varies from one to ten with an average of four to five pups.

**Conservation:** Wildlife biologists use many methods to track changes in furbearer populations. The results help them to set limits on hunting and trapping that are consistent with an animal's abundance. The system works so well that no *species* has become endangered from hunting and trapping since the advent of modern wildlife management in the early 1900s. A simple but useful method for monitoring Illinois' red fox population is made possible by archery deer hunters who volunteer to keep track of their wildlife observations and the amount of time they spend in the field. The number of red foxes sighted per 1,000 hours provides an index which allows biologists to detect long-term population trends along with any dramatic changes from one year to the next.



T, H

## raccoon *Procyon lotor*

**Range:** Common throughout Illinois.

**Habitat:** Raccoons occur in nearly all types of *habitat*, including urban and suburban areas.

**Habits:** Raccoons are nocturnal (most active at night). The area occupied by one raccoon overlaps those of others, making for densities of nine to 45 raccoons per square mile in much of Illinois. Top densities of 90-100 per square mile can occur in the Chicago suburbs.

Dens are found in tree cavities, burrows excavated by other animals, dry *tiles*, storm sewers and even attics and chimneys. Raccoons do not *hibernate*, but they sometimes stay in their dens for several days during periods of extreme cold or deep snowfall.

**Food:** Corn is an important food in agricultural areas. Bird food, pet food and table scraps discarded in the trash are mainstays in urban *habitats*. Some of their other favorites include persimmons, wild grapes, wild plums, blackberries, acorns, pokeberries, insects, fishes, crayfishes, frogs and small *mammals*.

**Reproduction:** Breeding occurs from January through March. A single litter of three to four pups is usually born in April or early May. Young raccoons are capable of surviving on their own by late summer but may accompany adult females until late fall or winter.

**Conservation:** Raccoons have flourished in Illinois because of their ability to exploit changes in the environment caused by agricultural production and residential development. Their success has some drawbacks. For example, outbreaks of disease are more likely to occur when populations are high. This increases the risks of diseases and parasites which can be passed from raccoons to people, pets and other wildlife. High numbers of raccoons can also affect songbirds, turtles and other kinds of wildlife by eating more than their fair share of eggs and young. Under the right conditions, regulated hunting and trapping of raccoons can help to improve the survival of less common kinds of wildlife, reduce the transmission of diseases and prevent damage to human property. Homeowners who are experiencing problems with raccoons can order *Nuisance Raccoons in Urban Settings and Keeping Wildlife Out of Your Home* at [www.indreackids.com](http://www.indreackids.com).



T, H

## Virginia opossum *Didelphis virginiana*

**Range:** Common throughout Illinois.

**Habitat:** Wooded areas near streams provide good *habitat*. Opossums also do well in many urban and suburban areas.

**Habits:** Opossums are slow, secretive and solitary. They venture out of their dens at night, traveling distances of one half to two miles depending on food availability and the time of year. Opossums do not *hibernate*, but may stay in a den for several days during periods of extreme cold or deep snowfall. They are not adapted well for cold temperatures and often lose portions of their ears or tails to frostbite in harsh winters.

Opossums often climb trees or run for cover when chased. They are not prone to aggressive behavior but will stand their ground and appear so when unable to retreat. If pressed, they "play possum" by feigning death. This reaction is caused by a nervous shock, but the opossum recovers quickly and continues on its way.

**Food:** Insects, carrion (dead animals), birds and their eggs, frogs, snails, earthworms, fruits and berries are common foods. Corn is an important part of their diet in agricultural areas. Bird food, pet food and table scraps discarded in the trash are common foods in urban and suburban areas.

**Reproduction:** The breeding season begins in early February. Most females have one litter per year, but some have two. Each litter contains an average of nine young. Opossums are the only marsupial (pouched *mammal*) in North America. The young, which are not fully developed when born, must make their way to the protection of the pouch or perish. Upon arriving, they grasp onto a nipple and stay attached for about two months. Young opossums leave the pouch at about 80 days of age. They remain with the female for approximately three weeks before striking out on their own.

**Conservation:** Few people try to improve *habitat* for opossums because they are abundant and adapt easily to a wide range of habitat conditions. However, practices that maintain woodlots, *fenoscres*, and hardwood forests are beneficial. Annual changes in the abundance of opossums are often linked to weather, with numbers declining during drought or harsh winters. Their high reproductive potential allows them to increase quickly when conditions are favorable.



T, H

## muskrat *Ondatra zibethicus*

**Range:** Common throughout Illinois.

**Habitat:** Muskrats live in rivers, streams, lakes, marshes, ponds, drainage ditches and swamps with permanent water.

**Habits:** Muskrats are most active from dusk to dawn. They seldom venture more than a few hundred feet from a lodge or den except in the spring when some search for new places to live or when forced to leave their homes by drought or other emergencies.

Muskrats living in areas with shallow, stable water levels (like marshes) often build dome-shaped "lodges" by cutting and piling cattails, bulrushes or other *aquatic* vegetation. Some are eight feet or more in diameter at the base and have walls one to two feet thick. Tunnels angle upward from underwater entrances to an inside nest chamber which is hollowed out above the water line.

In waterways with steep banks, muskrats usually burrow directly into the shoreline. Trails hollowed in front of the underwater entrances are sometimes visible. Burrows dug into the dams of man-made ponds can wash out during periods of high water, causing the ponds to drain. Regulated trapping of muskrats during the season in fall and winter can help to alleviate problems.

**Food:** Muskrats eat the roots and stems of *aquatic* plants such as cattail, bulrush, water lily and arrowhead. Clover, grasses and corn are common foods in agricultural areas.

**Reproduction:** Most female muskrats have two litters per year with an average of four to seven young per litter. On rare occasions, females born early in the spring will give birth in late summer.

**Conservation:** Licensed hunters and trappers support wildlife conservation through special fees and taxes that amount to millions of dollars per year in Illinois. Areas protected and managed with these funds provide important *habitat* for muskrats and thousands of other organisms. They also support a wide range of habitat activities including bird-watching, hiking, and wildlife photography. You can join licensed hunters and trappers in conserving wildlife by purchasing a State Habitat Stamp at any IDNR office or the sporting goods section of most discount stores.



T

## striped skunk *Mephitis mephitis*

**Range:** Common throughout Illinois.

**Habitat:** Striped skunks use a wide variety of *habitats*. Rural areas with rolling hills or bluffs and a mixture of crops, woods and pastures tend to support the greatest numbers. Skunks are also abundant in some suburban areas, especially those located near railways or high-tension power lines that provide good den sites and travel-ways.

**Habits:** Skunks are able to dig their own dens but prefer to use those excavated by badgers, woodchucks or other animals. Den sites also include caves, rock piles, old buildings, sheds and dry drainage *tiles* or storm sewers.

Skunks live in an area one to one and one-half miles in diameter. They use only a small portion of this area on any given night. Skunks are slow-moving and rarely aggressive. Their senses of sight, smell and hearing are poor compared to those of most *mammals*.

Skunks are noted for their ability to discharge a strong-smelling *musk* when harmed or threatened. Distinctive black and white markings act as an early warning signal to intruders, especially if they learned their lesson from a past encounter. Other warning signals include an arched back, raised tail and stamping motion with the front feet.

**Food:** Insects are a main component of the skunk's diet. They often feed on lawn grubs in suburban areas, leaving conical holes about one to three inches deep and three inches across. Other common foods include mice, young rabbits, corn, fruit, berries and the eggs and young of ground-nesting birds.

**Reproduction:** Breeding begins in February and lasts through March. A single litter of four to 10 young is born between early May and mid-June.

**Conservation:** Striped skunks benefit from broader efforts to reduce *soil erosion* and manage *habitat* for other kinds of wildlife. Regulated hunting and trapping can help to reduce problems that occur in rural areas. Suburban homeowners who hire someone to remove nuisance skunks should verify that the business is licensed by IDNR. Activities of these businesses are regulated by state laws which set standards for animal welfare and help protect the interests of homeowners.



T, H

## key

**H:** Regulated hunting is allowed in Illinois.

**P:** Protected by a continuous closed season.

**T:** Regulated trapping is allowed in Illinois.

