

SKUNKS MAY BE RARE HERE BUT YOU DON'T FORGET THEM

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Robins, geese and woodchucks all herald spring's imminence. On my way to Utica awhile back I saw another harbinger, one I was associated with in another time and place. It was a dead skunk that had tried to cross against the light on Route 12 south of Mapledale.

We seldom come across skunks here in the North Country. The skunk is not a true hibernator and our long winters and lack of forage preclude their existence here. You will note I prefaced this paragraph with the word "seldom." I remember two instances of skunks in the area and would be interested if others have as well.

There were plenty of skunks in Oswego County where I was born and raised. A neighborly animal, they live in close proximity to people and can go unnoticed for years. Skirmishes with local dogs usually leave the first notice of their presence. Acceptable for the most part unless the confrontation occurs under your front porch.

When I was a kid there was a certain distinction to being sent home from school reeking of skunk essence. You walked out, head held high, with a smirk on your face, followed by the howls of laughter from your buddies. Most of the girls were not so impressed. Many of us trapped skunks for spending money and it was impossible to avoid wearing their essence like a mantle.

Two of my most memorable encounters occurred long after I quit trapping them. Both episodes involved hunting dogs that I owned.

The first happened on a rabbit hunt that turned into a lesson on skunk development and behavior. My father fired my imagination with tales of pet skunks he had as a youngster. His premise was that if they were obtained at an early age, they could not release their scent.

Old Sport ran across a small skunk that did not resort to the ultimate defense in spite of repeated harassment. I seized on the moment and reached down to pick it up by the tail. I was blasted at close range with a direct hit. If it has never happened to you, it would be impossible to describe. My yearning for a pet skunk ended right then and there.

A coon-hunting friend of mine was generous enough to give me a fully trained coonhound named Spike. I could hardly wait to try him out.

The big night arrived and the action was fast and furious. Spike struck almost immediately and in no time at all we heard him fighting the coon on the ground. I could hardly believe my good fortune.

My partner and I arrived on the scene to witness Spike rolling on the ground next to his vanquished adversary. It was a big, dead skunk.

To make a long story short, Spike duplicated the feat each and every time we took to the field. We never did get a coon with Spike and I do not believe the guy I gave him to did either.

Believe me it takes a better man than me to drive home on a cold November night with a super-saturated hound sitting happily on the back seat. You guessed it: My buddy would not let me make Spike walk.

In spite of it all I still have fond memories of my skunk hunting days.