



MONTEREY NEWS

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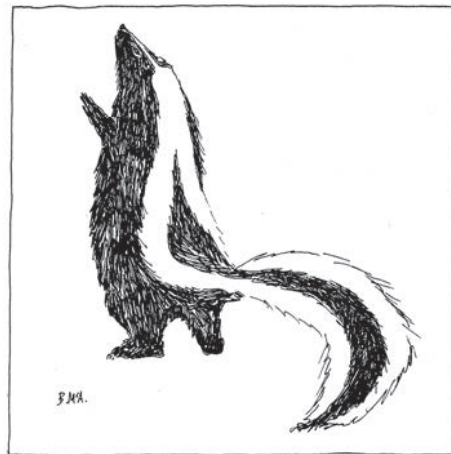
Brer Polecat

We have an old-style wildlife camera that comes and goes, depending upon the weather, and we can only use it in the winter: it is fresh snow. Sometimes those tracks are hard to identify. Maybe more snow has fallen and made them indistinct, just when you want to count the number of toes so you can tell if this is a five-toed or a four-toed foot.

If it is five, it might well be a member of the weasel clan. They are up and about in the winter and range in size from the otter down to the long-tailed weasel. Until recently, the striped skunk was considered part of this *Mustelidae* family, but taxonomists have now given all the skunks their own family, *Mephitidae*. Once the scientists get hold of your DNA there's no telling who your family will turn out to be.

Our snow album often tells us an otter has been by. They are big, up to twenty-five pounds, and loop along leaving pairs of five-toed prints with a long space between sets. Usually you can see a "tail-drag" and often the places where the otter takes a running leap and toboggans along on its belly, sliding over the snow. As for the weasels, they leave tracks in pairs, too, and are much smaller than otters, only about twelve ounces. In winter they are white, sometimes called "ermine." This is protective coloring in the snow, but the tip of the tail stays black. If the ermine is seen by a predator, maybe thanks to movement or maybe due to being a different shade of white from the new snow, that highly visible black tail tip can save its life. An owl or hawk may make a grab for what is most visible and the tail can slip through the talons and the weasel vanish before the big bird gets airborne to try again.

Skunks are highly visible in their black and white coat. They don't rely upon protective coloration, or speed to escape predation. Rather, their distinctive coloring combined with a reputation for serious spray keeps them safe from all but a few. Owls for some reason don't mind the spray of a skunk, though for the rest of us it is as bad as tear gas when delivered straight to the face. It can also cause



temporary blindness and pain that you don't forget. After that you leave the slow-moving, peace-loving skunk alone.

Though they are no longer part of the "weasel clan," skunks are still among those animals known as the "seven sleepers." Skunks do not go into a true or deep hibernation, rather a winter dormancy or "carnivorean lethargy." A warm spell in winter may bring them up from a sleeping place so they will move about foraging for a meal. Though they don't climb trees, they do like eggs and we once had a skunk visiting our little hen house, nosing under the chickens to take an egg. The hens did not raise much alarm and we were able to go out in the dark with a flashlight and watch the action, from a respectful distance.

Skunks up and about in winter are usually the males, and it could be they are restlessly thinking about mating time, which really comes later. Once the "sows" are up in spring, they will mate and after two months' gestation she moves into the den to give birth. Little kit skunks are born blind and naked, but their black and white pattern shows up on their skin. At three weeks, their scent sacs develop and when they are six weeks old they go out with their mother looking for insects and grubs. She may teach them to swim and go fishing, but their marksmanship with shooting out their musk seems to be an innate ability. The musk is oily and yellow and can fire eight or ten feet with great accuracy

to the eyeballs. Any animal hit at this range will react immediately with nausea and blindness for about twenty minutes.

We were sleeping in our tipi one night when we woke up suddenly to what felt like a chemical onslaught. It was our poor dog, running to us desperate with pain and confusion, having been hit in the face by skunk spray. Skunks spray as a last resort, after giving plenty of warning by lowering the head at an enemy and growling. The skunk stamps its feet angrily. Finally, never taking its eyes from the target, the skunk turns its hindquarters around, raises its tail high, and lets fly. A nearby molester will be hit squarely in the eyes with the oil, and at a greater distance this material is atomized and carried on the wind, sometimes detectable a mile and a half away.

The Cree name for skunk is "sheegawk" and the Abenaki say "seganku." The city of Chicago gets its name from the Indians and means "skunkland" or "place of skunks."

Some folks use the name "polecat," as in this southern jingle we learned from a friend.

"Brer Polecat wear a great big smile, and dress himself in scrumptious style.

But he can't hang his hat on society's rack, for the scandalous way he answer back.

And he ain't by himself in that, in that.

He ain't by himself in that."

— Bonner McAllester