

DISTEMPER IN SKUNKS



by Rosemary Curley

Wildlife is often in conflict with man, and of all species on P.E.I., striped skunks elicit the most complaints from homeowners. During the past year the Fish and Wildlife Division received a record number of complaints about skunks. Most of the skunks reported were sick and moribund.

Skunks captured on April 10, May 12, June 3 and 12, 1981, all showed signs of sickness, and subsequent diagnosis by Department of Agriculture pathologists indicated canine distemper. Two skunks were checked for rabies, but fortunately these tests proved negative. Distemper symptoms included excessive moisture around the mouth and eyes, and convulsions. When approached, skunks with distemper often showed total unawareness of people and the surroundings. Most of them displayed none of the natural instinct to obtain cover, and were found lying on lawns at high noon. One skunk found its way into a construction site, but despite lodgings in the new hospital, it died shortly afterward. Others were found under garden sheds and in the basements of occupied dwellings.

Between September 1980 and December 15, 1981, at least 60 sick skunks were removed by one conservation officer alone, and of these, over half were picked up since July 1981. Most of the skunks were located in the Charlottetown area, but others were found in Clyde River, New Dominion, Darnley, Oyster Bed Bridge, and Waterside, indicating that the distemper outbreak is not confined to the City. It is probable that the residents of Charlottetown are more likely to see sick skunks, and to report them.

Distemper in skunks is not transmittable to cats, but is considered to be the same strain as that in dogs. It is caused by a virus, and is not easily treated, but how often it is fatal to skunks is not known. Transmission of the disease is presumed to occur by direct contact with affected animals, or through inhaling distemper virus suspended in the air. In both cases, transmission is increased in dense populations, because animals are more often in contact with one another. The Fish and Wildlife Division has also received some raccoon specimens with distemper, but the disease does not appear widespread in that species. About 50% of raccoons are said to recover from the disease.