



Tales from a Sisters Naturalist
by Jim Anderson

They're all stinkers

Mustelids can be pretty stinky.

In addition to the American badger (which I wrote about recently), there are several of its cousins that have the same ability: American marten; ermine aka short-tailed weasel; fisher; long-tailed weasel; mink; northern river otter; striped skunk; Western spotted skunk and wolverine.

When I was a kid on the farm back in the 1940s, my dad said to me, "Jimmy, if you ruin this brand-new pair of shoes I got for you like you have all your others, wading around in Allspaugh's pond chasing turtles and frogs, I will never buy you another pair of shoes."

It took me a week to ruin those new shoes and the warning came to life. To purchase footwear in the future I took on a paper route for the *New Haven Register* and started trapping skunks (albeit reluctantly; even as a kid I did not want to kill anything) then skinning them, and selling the hides — which was enough to add to the paper route money for new shoes back in those days.

My grandfather allowed

me only 10 skunks. His reasoning was that skunks had a right to live, too. In addition, he made sure my sets would kill the skunks immediately without suffering.

Grandpa — who we called Puffy, for the stinky pipe he sucked on continually — showed me how to skin a skunk without running into trouble with the animal's scent-applying mechanism.

I remember the first lesson vividly because he made a serious error and we both got blasted. When we came in for supper that night my mom said, "Oh, oh it went wrong didn't it dad? Well, you two can eat out in the barn." The next day when I got to school — and even after several washings and de-scentings — Miss Fogerty, my seventh-grade teacher, asked me to sit in the back row.

Skunks are notorious for their anal scent glands, which they can use as a defensive weapon, usually with great success. They have two glands, one on each side of the anus. When a skunk is trapped, death is violent and that automatically erupts the nozzles that squeeze out on either side of the vent, and pressurizes the glands.

These glands produce the skunk's spray, which is a mixture of sulfur-containing chemicals, such as thiols (traditionally called mercaptans), which have an offensive odor (Hah! An understatement if there ever was one!)

When skinning a dead skunk the animal is either on a bench or hanging head-down. Either way the tiny nozzle can be overlooked and the skinner can

accidentally slice it with the sharp skinning tool with horrifying results.

In 1954, while living with Dean and Lily Hollinshead on their ranch, Timberlane, located on George A. Jones Rd. in Bend, Dean asked me if I'd take care of his livestock while he and Lily went on a trail ride in the Cascades. They were like parents to me, and of course I said yes. I milked the cows, fed and watered the horses, fed their chickens and collected eggs.

It was during the egg-collecting part of that wonderful week that I had the opportunity for a one-on-one relationship with a spotted skunk, the adventure that I wrote up in my book, "Tales of a Northwest Naturalist," which you can find in Paulina Springs Books or at the library, or send me an email and I'll see that you get one. What a grand time that was!

When it comes to weasels, many years ago my family and I had a face-to-face (literally) run in with the long-tailed variety at a cattle guard over near Burns. "Look! What's that?" Caleb shouted.

When I looked to see which way he was looking or pointing I was surprised, it was straight ahead, the way I had been looking.

I swiveled my head back to the area ahead of us, but saw nothing but a cattle guard coming up. "Where did you see what you saw?" I asked, and Caleb pointed straight ahead at the cattle guard. OK, so I came to stop with the cattle guard about three feet in front of us.

"Now where?" I asked, and as I did I saw



PHOTO BY JIM ANDERSON

A long-tailed weasel. Close enough to a spotted skunk.

a smaller-than-a-golf-ball brown shape slowly coming up behind one of the rails on the cattle guard, and the voice of a kid in the back seat. "There! See it? Right there behind the rail crossing the road."

Anyway the photo above is what we all saw as that beautiful long-tailed weasel stood up to see if all the noise we were making might have scared up something for it to eat. That turned out to be a very nice piece of habitat to see wildlife scurrying about, so much so that I try to slow down to this day when crossing a cattle-guard, fearing I might miss something.

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The 2019 Sisters Rodeo featuring an image shot by Rochelle Villanueva was unveiled in an event at Dixie's, Open Range and Heritage USA.

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