

FIELDNOTES

American Hog-nosed Skunk



ILLUSTRATION BY ZACKERY ZDINAK

DESCRIPTION: The American hog-nosed skunk (*Conepatus leuconotus*) is larger than other skunks, weighing 2.5 pounds to 6 pounds. It is a sexually dimorphic species, which means males are slightly larger than females. The hog-nosed skunk is black with a single broad white stripe down its back and a bushy, all-white tail. The snout is relatively long with an upturned, naked pad that gives this skunk a hog-like appearance.

The hog-nosed skunk has an acute sense of smell, which it uses to locate prey in the ground or under debris. With the very long claws on its front feet, it forages by digging and rooting through the dirt. This skunk will uproot large areas in search of food, sometimes disturbing an area as much as 40 feet across. The shape and strength of its shoulder blades and forelimbs resemble those of badgers rather than other species of skunk. However, like all skunk species, the hog-nosed skunk has anal scent glands that secrete a musky, foul-smelling discharge, which serves as a defense mechanism against predators.

DISTRIBUTION: American hog-nosed skunks have been reported throughout the Southwest, including southern Arizona, New Mexico and southern Texas; into Mexico and Central America; and as far north as Colorado. *Conepatus* is the only skunk genus in South America. In Arizona, the species occurs primarily in the southeastern portion of the state. However, specimens have been obtained from as far north as Flagstaff and the Hualapai Mountains.

HABITAT: These skunks occupy a variety of habitats, including canyons, stream sides, rocky terrain,

grasslands, pinyon-juniper woodlands and montane shrublands. In Arizona, they are found mostly in woodlands but also in grasslands, chaparral and conifer forest. Underground burrows, brush piles, rock crevices, woodrat nests and mine shafts may be used during the day to escape high temperatures and to raise young. Although these skunks often are associated with riparian vegetation, we don't know whether this species requires free water or can obtain what it needs from its diet. Hog-nosed skunks have been recorded at up to 9,000 feet elevation in pine-fir forests in Arizona's Graham Mountains.

BIOLOGY: The American hog-nosed skunk is nocturnal. This insectivorous skunk digs for most of its food, which includes insects, larvae and worms but may also feature mice, lizards, bulbs, carrion and garbage when insects are less available. Skunks aid in maintaining healthy agricultural products by eating harmful crop-eating insects.

Mating season occurs in late winter and early spring, with gestation typically lasting 42 to 60 days. A litter of two to four young are born in April or May. At birth, they are hairless and blind but have musk. The young are on their own once they reach adult size in August. These skunks most likely live less than four years.

STATUS: The American hog-nosed skunk is a wide-ranging species. In Arizona, data suggest that populations are stable. However, studies in Texas reveal a decline in local populations, possibly as a result of conversion of brushy habitat to agriculture.

MANAGEMENT NEEDS: Skunks are one of the primary wildlife species responsible for reported cases of rabies in the United States. However, "trap-vaccinate-release" and other management programs tend to target striped skunks. Hog-nosed skunks have low capture rates at oral vaccination bait traps, probably because they are primarily insectivorous. Therefore, development of cost-effective monitoring methods and research on rabies management should be considered when managing this species. —April Howard