Common American Skunk.

MEPHITIS CHINGA.—TIEDIMANN

COMMON AMERICAN SKUNK.

PLATE XLII.—FEMALE.

Magnitudine F. cati ; supra nigricans, stries albis longitudinalibus insigneta ; cauda longa villosissima.

CHARACTERS.

Size of a cat ; general colour, blackish-brown, with white longitudinal stripes on the back ; many varieties in its white markings ; tail, long and bushy.

SYNONYMES.

- OUINESQUE, Sagard Theodat, Canada, p. 748.
 ENFANT DU DIABLE, Charlevoix, Nouv. France, iii., p. 133.
 SKUNK-WEASEL, Pennant's Arctic Zool., vol. i., p. 85.
 SKUNK, Hearne's Journey, p. 377.
 MEPHITIS CHINGA, Tiedimann, Zool. i., p. 361, (Anh. 37,) 1808.
 POLE-CAT SKUNK, Kalm's Travels, vol. ii., p. 378.
 VIVERA MEPHITIS, Gmel. (L.) Syst. Nat., p. 88.
 MUSTELA AMERICANA, Desm. Mam., p. 186, A. D. 1820.
 MEPHITIS AMERICANA, Sab., Frank. Journal, p. 653.
 " " Harlan, Fauna, p. 70.
 THE SKUNK, Godm., Nat. Hist., vol. i., p. 213.
 MEPHITIS AMERICANA, Var. HUDSONICA, Rich., F. B. A., p. 55.
 " CHINGA, Lichtenstein, Darstellung neuer oder wenig bekannter Säugethiere, Berlin, 1827-34, xlv. Tafel, 1st figure.
 " CHINQUE, Licht., Ueber die Gattung Mephitis, p. 32, Berlin, 1838.
 " AMERICANA, Dekay, Nat. Hist. N. Y., pt. 1, p. 29.

DESCRIPTION.

This species in all its varieties has a broad fleshy body, resembling that of the wolverene ; it stands low on its legs, and is much wider at the hips than at the shoulders. Fur, rather long and coarse, with much longer, smooth and glossy hairs, interspersed.

The head is small compared with the size of the body ; forehead, somewhat rounded ; nose, obtuse, covered with short hair to the snout,

which is naked; eyes, small; ears, short, broad and rounded, clothed with hair on both surfaces; whiskers, few and weak, extending a little beyond the eyes; feet, rather broad, and covered with hair concealing the nails, which on the fore-feet are robust, curved, compressed, and acute; palms, naked. The trunk of the tail is nearly half as long as the body. Hair on the tail, very long and bushy, containing from within an inch of the root to the extremity, no mixture of the finer fur. The glands are situated on either side of the rectum: the ducts are about an inch in length, and are of a somewhat pyriform shape. The inner membrane is corrugated; the principal portion of the glands is a muscular tendinous substance. The sac is capable of containing about three drachms. When the tail is erected for the purpose of ejecting the nauseous fluid, the open orifices of the ducts are perceptible on a black disk surrounding the anus. The exit from the duct at the anus when distended will admit a crow-quill.

COLOUR.

This species varies so much in colour that there is some difficulty in finding two specimens alike; we have given a representation on our plate of the colour which is most common in the Middle States, and which Dr. HARLAN described as *Mephitis Americana*, our specimen only differing from his in having a longitudinal stripe on the forehead.

The under fur on all those portions of the body which are dark coloured, is dark brown; in those parts which are light coloured, it is white from the roots. These under colours, however, are concealed by a thick coat of longer, coarser hairs, which are smooth and glossy.

There is a narrow white stripe commencing on the nose and running to a point on the top of the head; a patch of white, of about two inches in length, and of the same breadth, commences on the occiput and covers the upper parts of the neck; on each side of the vertebræ of the tail there is a broad longitudinal stripe for three-fourths of its length; the tail is finally broadly tipped with white, interspersed with a few black hairs. The colour on every other part of the body is blackish-brown.

Another specimen from the same locality has a white stripe on the forehead; a large white spot on the occiput, extending downwards, diverging on the back, and continuing down the sides to within two inches of the extremity of the tail, leaving the back, the end of the tail, and the whole of the under surface, blackish-brown.

The young on the plate are from the same nest; one has white stripes on the back, with a black tail; the other has no stripes on the back, but the end of its tail is white.

In general we have found the varieties in a particular locality marked with tolerable uniformity. To this rule, however, there are many exceptions.

In the winter of 1814 we caused a burrow to be opened in Rensselaer county, N. Y., which we knew contained a large family of this species. We found eleven: they were all full grown, but on examining their teeth and claws, we concluded that the family was composed of a pair of old ones, with their large brood of young of the previous season. The male had a white stripe on the forehead; and from the occiput down the whole of the back had another white stripe four inches in breadth; its tail was also white. The female had no white stripe on the forehead, but had a longitudinal stripe on each side of the back, and a very narrow one on the dorsal line; the tail was wholly black. The young differed very widely in colour; we could not find two exactly alike; some were in part of the colour of the male, others were more like the female, whilst the largest proportion were intermediate in their markings, and some seemed to resemble neither parent. We recollect one that had not a white hair, except the tip of the tail and a minute dorsal line.

On the other hand, we had in February (the same winter) another family of Skunks, captured with a steel-trap placed at the mouth of their burrow; they were taken in the course of ten days, and we have reason to believe none escaped. In this family there was a very strong resemblance. The animals which we considered the old pair, had two longitudinal stripes on the back, with a spot on the forehead; in the young, the only difference was, that in some of the specimens the white line united on the back above the root of the tail, whilst in others it extended down along the sides of the tail till it nearly reached the extremity; and in some of the specimens the tail was tipped with white, in others, black. We had an opportunity near Easton, Pennsylvania, of seeing an old female Skunk with six young. We had no knowledge of the colour of the male. The female, however, had two broad stripes, with a very narrow black dorsal line; the young differed considerably in their markings, some having black, and others white, tails.

In the sand-hills near Columbia, South Carolina, we met along the sides of the highway four half-grown animals of this species; they all had a narrow white line on each side of the back, and a small white spot on the forehead; the tails of two of them were tipped with white; the others had the whole of their tails black.

From all the observations we have been able to make in regard to the colours of the different varieties of this species, we have arrived at the

conclusion, that when a pair are alike in colour the young will bear a strong resemblance in their markings to the old. When on the contrary the parents differ, the young assume a variety of intermediate colours.

DIMENSIONS.

From point of nose to root of tail	-	-	-	17	inches.
Tail (vertebræ)	-	-	-	8 $\frac{3}{4}$	do.
Tail, to end of hair	-	-	-	12 $\frac{3}{4}$	do.
Distance between eyes	-	-	-	1 $\frac{1}{8}$	do.
From point of nose to corner of mouth	-	-	-	1 $\frac{3}{8}$	do.

Weight, 6 $\frac{1}{2}$ pounds.

HABITS.

There is no quadruped on the continent of North America the approach of which is more generally detested than that of the Skunk: from which we may learn that, although from the great and the strong we have to apprehend danger, the feeble and apparently insignificant may have it in their power to annoy us almost beyond endurance.

In the human species we sometimes perceive that a particular faculty has received an extraordinary development, the result of constant devotion to one subject; whilst in other respects the mind of the individual is of a very ordinary character. The same remark will hold good applied to any particular organ or member of the body, which, by constant use, (like the organs of touch in the blind man,) becomes so improved as to serve as a substitute for others: but in the lower orders of animals this prominence in a particular organ is the result of its peculiar conformation, or of instinct. Thus the power of the rhinoceros is exerted chiefly by his nasal horn, the wild boar relies for defence on his tusks, the safety of the kangaroo depends on his hind-feet, which not only enable him to make extraordinary leaps, but with which he deals vigorous blows, the bull attacks his foes with his horns, the rattlesnake's deadly venom is conveyed through its fangs, and the bee has the means of destroying some of its enemies by its sting, whilst in every other power for attack or self-defence these various creatures are comparatively feeble.

The Skunk, although armed with claws and teeth strong and sharp enough to capture his prey, is slow on foot, apparently timid, and would be unable to escape from many of his enemies, if he were not possessed of a power by which he often causes the most ferocious to make a rapid retreat, run their noses into the earth, and roll or tumble on the ground as if in convulsions; and, not unfrequently, even the bravest of our

boasting race is by this little animal compelled suddenly to break off his train of thought, *hold his nose*, and run, as if a lion were at his heels!

Among the first specimens of natural history we attempted to procure was the Skunk, and the sage advice to "look before you leap," was impressed on our mind, through several of our senses, by this species.

It happened in our early school-boy days, that once, when the sun had just set, as we were slowly wending our way home from the house of a neighbour, we observed in the path before us a pretty little animal, playful as a kitten, moving quietly along: soon it stopped, as if waiting for us to come near, throwing up its long bushy tail, turning round and looking at us like some old acquaintance: we pause and gaze; what is it? It is not a young puppy or a cat; it is more gentle than either; it seems desirous to keep company with us, and like a pet poodle, appears most happy when only a few paces in advance, preceding us, as if to show the path: what a pretty creature to carry home in our arms! it seems too gentle to bite; let us catch it. We run towards it; it makes no effort to escape, but waits for us; it raises its tail as if to invite us to take hold of its brush. We seize it instantaneously, and grasp it with the energy of a miser clutching a box of diamonds; a short struggle ensues, when—faugh! we are suffocated; our eyes, nose, and face, are suddenly bespattered with the most horrible fetid fluid. Imagine to yourself, reader, our surprise, our disgust, the sickening feelings that almost overcome us. We drop our prize and take to our heels, too stubborn to cry, but too much alarmed and discomfited just now, to take another look at the cause of our misfortune, and effectually undeceived as to the real character of this seemingly mild and playful little fellow.

We have never felt that aversion to the musky odour imparted by many species of the ferine tribe of animals, that others evince; but we are obliged to admit that a close proximity to a recently killed Skunk, has ever proved too powerful for our olfactories. We recollect an instance when sickness of the stomach and vomiting were occasioned, in several persons residing in Saratoga county, N. Y., in consequence of one of this species having been killed under the floor of their residence during the night. We have seen efforts made to rid clothes which have been sprinkled by a Skunk, of the offensive odour: resort was had to burying them in the earth, washing, and using perfumes; but after being buried a month they came forth almost as offensive as when they had first been placed in the ground; and as for the application of odoriferous preparations, it seemed as if all the spices of Araby could neither weaken nor change the character of this overpowering and nauseating

fluid. Washing and exposure to the atmosphere certainly weaken the scent, but the wearer of clothes that have been thus infected, should he accidentally stand near the fire in a close room, may chance to be mortified by being reminded that he is not altogether free from the consequences of an "unpleasant" hunting excursion. We have, however, found chloride of lime a most effectual disinfectant when applied to our recent specimens. That there is something very acrid in the fluid ejected by the Skunk, cannot be doubted, when we consider its effects. Dr. RICHARDSON states that he knew several Indians who lost their eyesight in consequence of inflammation produced by its having been thrown into them by the animal. The instant a dog has received a discharge of this kind on his nose and eyes, he appears half distracted, plunging his nose into the earth, rubbing the sides of his face on the leaves and grass, and rolling in every direction. We have known several dogs, from the eyes of which the swelling and inflammation caused by it did not disappear for a week; still we have seen others, which, when on a raccoon hunt, did not hesitate, in despite of the consequences, to kill every Skunk they started, and although severely punished at the time, they showed no reluctance to repeat the attack the same evening, if a fresh subject presented itself.

This offensive fluid is contained in two small sacs situated on each side of the root of the tail, and is ejected through small ducts near the anus. We have on several occasions witnessed the manner in which this secretion is discharged. When the Skunk is irritated, or finds it necessary to defend himself, he elevates his tail over his back, and by a strong muscular exertion ejects it in two thread-like streams in the direction in which the enemy is observed. He appears to take an almost unerring aim, and almost invariably salutes a dog in his face and eyes. Dr. RICHARDSON states that he ejects this noisome fluid for upwards of four feet; in this he has considerably underrated the powers of this natural syringe of the Skunk, as we measured the distance on one occasion, when it extended upwards of fourteen feet. The notion of the old authors that this fluid is the secretion of the kidneys, thrown to a distance by the aid of his long tail, must be set down among the vulgar errors, for in that case whole neighbourhoods would be compelled to breath a tainted gale, as Skunks are quite common in many parts of the country.

The Skunk, in fact, is a very cleanly animal, and never suffers a drop of this fluid to touch his fur; we have frequently been at the mouth of his burrow, and although a dozen Skunks might be snugly sheltered within, we could not detect the slightest unpleasant smell. He is as

careful to avoid soiling himself with this fluid, as the rattlesnake is, not to suffer his body to come in contact with his poisonous fangs.

Should the Skunk make a discharge from this all-conquering battery during the day, the fluid is so thin and transparent that it is scarcely perceptible; but at night it has a yellowish luminous appearance; we have noticed it on several occasions, and can find no more apt comparison than an attenuated stream of phosphoric light. That the spot where a Skunk has been killed will be tainted for a considerable time, is well known. At a place where one had been killed in autumn, we remarked that the scent was still tolerably strong after the snows had thawed away the following spring. Generally, however, the spot thus scented by the Skunk is not particularly offensive after the expiration of a week or ten days. The smell is more perceptible at night and in damp weather, than during the day or in a drought.

The properties of the peculiarly offensive liquor contained in the sacs of the Skunk, have not, so far as we are advised, been fully ascertained. It has, however, been sometimes applied to medical purposes. Professor Ives, of New-Haven, administered to an asthmatic patient a drop of this fluid three times a day. The invalid was greatly benefited: all his secretions, however, were soon affected to such a degree, that he became highly offensive both to himself and to those near him. He then discontinued the medicine, but after having been apparently well for some time, the disease returned. He again called on the doctor for advice,—the old and tried recipe was once more recommended, but the patient declined taking it, declaring that the remedy was worse than the disease!

We were once requested by a venerable clergyman, an esteemed friend, who had for many years been a martyr to violent paroxysms of asthma, to procure for him the glands of a Skunk; which, according to the prescription of his medical adviser, were kept tightly corked in a smelling bottle, which was applied to his nose when the symptoms of his disease appeared.

For some time he believed that he had found a specific for his distressing complaint; we were however subsequently informed, that having uncorked the bottle on one occasion while in the pulpit during service, his congregation finding the smell too powerful for their olfactories, made a hasty retreat, leaving him nearly alone in the church.

We are under an impression, that the difficulty of preparing specimens of this animal may be to a considerable extent obviated, by a proper care in capturing it. If it has been worried and killed by a dog, skinning a recent specimen is almost insupportable; but if killed by a sudden blow, or shot in a vital part, so as to produce instant death, the Skunk

emits no unpleasant odour, and the preparation of a specimen is even less unpleasant than stuffing a mink. We have seen several that were crushed in deadfalls, that were in nowise offensive. We had one of their burrows opened to within a foot of the extremity, where the animals were huddled together. Placing ourselves a few yards off, we suffered them successively to come out. As they slowly emerged and were walking off, they were killed with coarse shot aimed at the shoulders. In the course of half an hour, seven, (the number contained in the burrow,) were obtained; one only was offensive, and we were enabled without inconvenience to prepare six of them for specimens.

The Skunk does not support a good character among the farmers. He will sometimes find his way into the poultry-house, and make some havoc with the setting hens; he seems to have a peculiar penchant for eggs, and is not very particular whether they have been newly laid, or contain pretty large rudiments of the young chicken; yet he is so slow and clumsy in his movements, and creates such a commotion in the poultry-house, that he usually sets the watch-dog in motion, and is generally detected in the midst of his depredations; when, retiring to some corner, he is either seized by the dog, or is made to feel the contents of the farmer's fowling piece. In fact the poultry have far more formidable enemies than the Skunk. The ermine and brown weasel are in this respect rivals with which his awkward powers cannot compare; and the mink is a more successful prowler.

The Skunk is so slow in his actions, that it is difficult to discover in what manner he obtains food to enable him always to appear in good condition. In the northern part of New-York the gray rabbit frequently retires to the burrow of the fox, Maryland marmot, or Skunk. Many of them remain in these retreats during the day. We have seen the tracks of the Skunk in the snow, on the trail of the gray rabbit, leading to these holes, and have observed tufts of hair and patches of skin scattered in the vicinity, betokening that the timid animal had been destroyed. We on one occasion marked a nest of the ruffed grouse, (*T. umbellus*), with the intention of placing the eggs under a common hen a few days before they should hatch, but upon going after them we found they had been eaten, and the feathers of the grouse were lying about the nest. Believing the depredator to have been an ermine, we placed a box-trap near the spot baited with a bird; and on the succeeding night caught a Skunk, which we doubt not was the robber. This species also feeds on mice, frogs, and lizards; and during summer no inconsiderable portion of its food consists of insects, as its excrements usually exhibit the legs and backs of a considerable number of beetles.

On dissecting a specimen which we obtained from the middle districts of Carolina, we ascertained that the animal had been a more successful collector of entomological specimens than ourselves, as he had evidently devoured on the night previous a greater number (about a dozen) of a very rare and large beetle, (*Scarabæus tityus*,) than we had been able to find in a search of ten years.

The Skunk being very prolific, would, if allowed to multiply around the farm-yard, prove a great and growing annoyance. Fortunately there are nocturnal animals that are prowling about as well as he. The dog, although he does not eat this species, scarcely ever fails to destroy a Skunk whenever he can lay hold of him. A wolf that had been sent from the interior of Carolina to Charleston, to be prepared as a specimen, we observed was strongly tainted with the smell of this animal, and we concluded from hence, that as a hungry wolf is not likely to be very choice in selecting his food, he will, if nothing better offers, make a meal on it. Whilst riding along the border of a field one evening, we observed a large bird of some species darting to the ground, and immediately heard a struggle, and were saluted by the odour from the "Enfant du diable," as old CHARLEVOIX has designated the Skunk. We visited the spot on the following day, and found a very large animal of this species partly devoured. We placed a fox-trap in the vicinity, and on the following morning found our trap had captured a large horned owl, which had evidently caused the death of the Skunk, as in point of offensive effluvia there was no choice between them. This species is generally very easily taken in traps. It will not avoid any kind of snare—is willing to take the bait, whether it be flesh, fish, or fowl, and proves a great annoyance to the hunters whose traps are set for the fisher and marten. The burrows of the Skunk are far less difficult to dig out than those of the fox. They are generally found on a flat surface, whilst the dens of the fox are more frequently dug on the side of a hill. They have seldom more than one entrance, whilst those of the fox have two, and often three. The gallery of the burrow dug by the Skunk runs much nearer the surface than that excavated by the fox. After extending seven or eight feet in a straight line, about two feet beneath the surface, there is a large excavation containing an immense nest of leaves. Here during winter may be found lying, from five to fifteen individuals of this species. There are sometimes one or two galleries diverging from this bed, running five or six feet further; in which, if the burrow has been disturbed, the whole family may generally be found, ready to employ the only means of defence with which Nature has provided them.

This animal generally retires to his burrow about December, in the Northern States, and his tracks are not again visible until near the tenth of February. He lays up no winter store; and like the bear, raccoon, and Maryland marmot, is very fat on retiring to his winter quarters, and does not seem to be much reduced in flesh at his first appearance toward spring, but is observed to fall off soon afterwards. He is not a sound sleeper on these occasions; on opening his burrow we found him, although dull and inactive, certainly not asleep, as his black eyes were peering at us from the hole, into which we had made an opening, seeming to warn us not to place too much reliance on the hope of finding this striped "weasel asleep."

In the upper districts of Carolina and Georgia, where the Skunk is occasionally found, he, like the raccoon in the Southern States, does not retire to winter quarters, but continues actively prowling about during the night through the winter months.

A large Skunk, which had been in the vicinity of our place, near New-York, for two or three days, was one morning observed by our gardener in an old barrel with only one head in, which stood upright near our stable. The animal had probably jumped into it from an adjoining pile of logs to devour an egg, as our hens were in the habit of laying about the yard. On being discovered, the Skunk remained quietly at the bottom of the barrel, apparently unable to get out, either by climbing or by leaping from the bottom. We killed him by throwing a large stone into the open barrel;—he did not make the least effort to eject the nauseous fluid with which he was provided. Had he not been discovered, he would no doubt have died of starvation, as he had no means of escaping. At times, especially during the summer season, the Skunk smells so strongly of the fetid fluid contained in his glands, that when one or two hundred yards distant it is easily known that he is in the neighbourhood.

We doubt not the flesh of the Skunk is well tasted and savoury. We observed it cooked and eaten by the Indians. The meat was white and fat, and they pronounced it better than the opossum,—infinitely superior to the raccoon, (which they called rank meat,) and fully equal to roast pig. We now regret that our squeamishness prevented us from trying it.

We have seen the young early in May; there were from five to nine in a litter.

The fur is rather coarse. It is seldom used by the hatters, and never we think by the furriers; and from the disagreeable task of preparing the skin, it is not considered an article of commerce.

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION.

This species has a tolerably wide range, being found as far to the north as lat. 56° or 57° . We have met with it both in Upper and Lower Canada, where it however appeared less common than in the Atlantic States. It is exceedingly abundant in every part of the Northern States. In New-England, New-York, and Pennsylvania, it is more frequently met with than in Maryland, Virginia, and the more Southern States. It is not uncommon on both sides of the Virginia Mountains, and is well known in Kentucky, Indiana, and Illinois. It is not unfrequently met with in the higher portions of South Carolina, Georgia, and Alabama. In the alluvial lands of these three States, however, it is exceedingly rare. We possess in the Charleston Museum two specimens procured in Christ Church Parish, by Professor EDMUND RAVENEL, that were regarded as a great curiosity by the inhabitants. It becomes more common a hundred miles from the seaboard, and is not unfrequently met with in the sand-hills near Columbia. To the south we have traced it to the northern parts of Florida, and have seen it in Louisiana. To the west it has been seen as far as the banks of the Mississippi. LEWIS and CLARK, and others, frequently saw Skunks west of the Rocky Mountains, near their winter encampments, but we have as yet had no means of ascertaining that they were of this species.

GENERAL REMARKS.

Although we do not regard the distribution of colours in the American Skunk, as of much importance in deciding on the species, and hence, have rejected as mere varieties, all those that can only be distinguished from each other by their markings, we nevertheless differ very widely from Baron CUVIER (Ossemens Fossiles, iv.) and others, who treat all the American Mephites as mere varieties. We have examined and compared many specimens in the museums of Europe and America, and possess others from Texas and other portions of the United States, and we feel confident that both in North and South America several very distinct species exist. We will endeavour, as we proceed in the present work, to investigate their characters, and describe those species that are found within the range to which we have restricted our inquiries. We have in the museums of London examined and compared the species described by BENNET, (Proceeds. Zool. Soc., 1833, p. 39,) as *M. nasuta*, which appears to have been previously described by Dr. LICHTENSTEIN, of Berlin, under the name of *M. mesoleuca*, (Darst. der Säugeth. tab. 44, fig. 2,) as also several species characterized by GRAY, (Magazine of Nat. Hist., 1837, p.

581,) that are very distinct from the present. In the immense collection existing in the museum at Berlin, one of the best regulated museums in Europe, and which is particularly rich in the natural productions of Mexico, Texas, California, and South America, several species are exhibited that cannot be referred to our Skunk. We are under obligations to Dr. LICHTENSTEIN for a valuable work, (*Darstellung neuer oder wenig bekannter Säugethiere*, Berlin, 1827-1834,) which contains figures and descriptions of a number of new species of Skunks. Also a monograph, (*Ueber die Gattung Mephitis*, Berlin, 1838,) in sixty-five pages quarto, with plates, which contains much learned research, and has greatly extended our previous knowledge of the genus. He describes seventeen species, all, with one African exception, belonging to North and South America. North of Texas, however, he recognises only two species, the present, and *Mephitis interrupta*, of RAFINESQUE; the latter, however, still requires a more careful comparison. All our American authors have applied the name *Mephitis Americana*, of DESMAREST, to our present species. It is now ascertained, however, that TIEDIMANN described it twelve years earlier under the name of *M. chinga*, which, according to the rigid rules to which naturalists feel bound to adhere, must be retained, and we therefore have adopted it.

Audubon, John James and Bachman, John. 1851. "Mephitis Chinga, Common American Skunk [Pl. XLII, female]." *The quadrupeds of North America* 1, 317–328. <https://doi.org/10.5962/p.322482>.

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