On Stone by W.E. Hitchcock.

Large-Tailed Skunk.

Drawn from Nature by J.W. Audubon.

Litho Printed & Col'd by J.T. Bowen, Philad^a

MEPHITIS MACROURA.—Licht.

LARGE-TAILED SKUNK.

PLATE CII.—MALE.

M. magnitudine felis cati (domestica), fusco-niger, striis duabus albis dorsalibus, vitta alba frontali, cauda capite longiore.

CHARACTERS.

Size of the domestic cat ; general colour, brownish-black ; a white stripe on each side of the back, and on the forehead ; tail longer than the head.

SYNONYMES.

MEPHITIS MACROURA. Licht., Darstellung neuer oder wenig bekannter Säugthiere, Berlin, 1827-34, Tafel xlvi.

" MEXICANUS GRAY. Loudon's Mag., p. 581. 1837.

DESCRIPTION.

Body, as in other species of this genus, stout ; head, small ; nose short, rather acute, and naked ; ears short, rounded, clothed with short hair on both surfaces ; eyes, small ; claws, slender and weak ; soles of the feet naked.

The body is covered with two kinds of hair ; the first long and glossy, the fur underneath soft and woolly ; tail very long, rather bushy, covered with long hairs, and without any of the softer and shorter fur.

COLOUR.

There are slight variations in the markings of the specimens we examined in the museums of Berlin and London, and in those we possess. This species appears, however, to be less eccentric in colour and markings than the common skunk *M. chinga*.

In the specimen from which our figure was made, there is a rather broad longitudinal white stripe running from the nose to near the back of the head ; upper surface of neck and back, white, with a narrow black dorsal stripe beginning on the middle of the back and running down on the upper surface of the tail ; a spot of white under the shoulder, and another along

the flanks; the hairs on the tail are irregularly mixed with white and black; under surface black.

Another skin from the same region has a narrower stripe on the forehead, the usual white stripes from the back of the head along the sides nearly meeting again at the root of the tail, leaving the dorsal black patch very much broader than in the specimen just described, and of an oval shape; the tail contains a greater number of black hairs, and towards the tip is altogether black; sides, legs, and whole under surface, black.

LICHTENSTEIN'S figure resembles this specimen in form and markings, with the exceptions that it represents scarcely any black patch on the back, and that it exhibits a longitudinal white stripe running from the shoulder to the hip. LICHTENSTEIN has also described and figured the young of this species, which very closely resembles the adult.

DIMENSIONS.

Male.—Killed January 28, 1846.

	Feet.	inches.
From point of nose to root of tail, - - -	1	4
Tail (vertebræ), - - - - -	1	1
“ to end of hair, - - - - -	1	6
Between ears, - - - - -		2½
Girth around the body, behind fore-legs, - -		9
“ “ belly, - - - - -	1	2½
Height from sole of fore-foot to top of shoulders,		8½
Weight, 4½lb.—specimen fat.		

HABITS.

In Texas, during the winter of 1845–6, specimens of this skunk were obtained by J. W. AUDUBON; the first he met with was seen on one of the high and dry prairies west of Houston, on the road to Lagrange; this was, however, only a young one. It was easily caught, as these animals never attempt to escape by flight, depending on the fetid discharges which they, like the common skunk, eject, to disgust their assailant and cause him to leave them in safety. By throwing sticks and clods of dirt at this young one, he was induced to display his powers in this way, and teased until he had emptied the glandular sacs which contain the detestable secretion. He was then comparatively disarmed, and by thrusting a forked stick over the back of his head, was pinned to the ground, then seized and thrust into a bag, the mouth of which being tied up, he was

considered safely captured, and was slung to one of the pack-saddles of the baggage-mules. The fetor of this young skunk was not so horrid as that of the common species (*Mephitis chinga*).

On arriving at the camping ground for the night, the party found that their prisoner had escaped by gnawing a hole in the bag, being unobserved by any one.

This species is described as very common in some parts of Texas, and its superb tail is now and then used by the country folks by way of plume or feather in their hats. J. W. AUDUBON, in his Journal, remarks: "We were much amused at the disposition manifested by some of the privates in the corps of Rangers, to put on extra finery when opportunity offered. At one time a party returned from a chase after Indians whom they had overtaken and routed. Several of them had whole turkey-cocks' tails stuck on one side of their hats, and had long pendant trains of feathers hanging behind their backs, which they had taken from the 'braves' of the Wakoos. One young fellow, about eighteen years of age, had a superb head-dress and suit to match, which he had taken from an Indian, whom, to use his own expression, he had scared out of it; he had, to complete the triumphal decoration of his handsome person, painted his face all the colours of the rainbow, and looked fierce enough. In contrast with these freaks of some of the men, we noticed that their tried and chivalrous leaders, HAYS, WALKER, GILLESPIE, and CHEVALIER, were always dressed in the plainest costume the 'regulations' permitted."

The Large-Tailed Skunk feeds upon snakes, lizards, insects, birds' eggs, and small animals; and it is said that at the season when the pecan (*Carya olivaeformis*) ripens, they eat those nuts, as well as acorns. This is strange, considering their carnivorous formation. They burrow in winter, and live in hollows and under roots. They produce five or six young at a birth.

We are indebted to Col. GEO. A. MCCALL, U. S. A., for the following interesting account of an adventure with one of these Skunks, which, besides being written in an entertaining and lively manner, sets forth in a strong light the dread the very idea of being defiled by these offensive brutes causes in every one who has ever been in those parts of the country they inhabit:—

"In New Mexico, in September last, returning from Los Vegas to Santa Fé, I halted for the night at Cottonwood creek. Here, I pitched my tent on the edge of a beautiful grove of the trees (*Populus angulatus*) which give name to the stream.

"Wishing to reach my destination at an early hour on the morrow, I directed the men to be up before day, in order that they might feed their

horses, get their breakfast, and be ready to take the road as soon as it was fairly daylight. After a refreshing sleep, I awoke about an hour before day, and the familiar sound of my horse munching his corn by the side of my tent, where he was usually picketed, informed me that my men were already astir. At this hour, the moon, almost at the full, was low in the west, and flung its mellow light adown the mountain gorge, in rays that were nearly horizontal. And therefore, not finding it necessary to strike a light, I was on the point of rising, when I heard, as I thought, my servant opening the mess-basket, which stood near the foot of my bed. I spoke to him; but receiving no answer, I turned my eyes in that direction, and discovered on the front wall of my tent a little shadow playing fantastically over the canvas, upon which the moon's rays fell, after passing over my head. With a hunter's eye, I at once recognized in this shadow the outline of the uplifted tail of a *Mephitis Macroura*, vulgo Large-Tailed Skunk, whose body was concealed from my view behind the mess-basket. Into this, doubtless attracted by the scent of a cold boiled bacon-ham, he was evidently endeavouring to effect an entrance.

"Being well acquainted with his habits and character, I knew I must manage to get rid of my visitor without seriously alarming or provoking him, or I should in all probability be the sufferer. I therefore thought I would at first, merely in a quiet way, signify my presence; on discovering which, perhaps, he would take the hint, and his departure at the same time. So, 'I coughed and cried hem!' but my gentleman only raised his head above the top of the basket for a moment, and then renewed his efforts to lift the lid. I now took up one of my boots that lay by my bed, and struck the heel smartly against the tent-pole. Again the intruder raised his head, and regarded me for a moment; after which he left the basket and passed round the foot of my bed, which, I should mention, was spread upon the ground. At first, I thought he had, indeed, taken the hint, and was about to slope off. But I had, in fact, only excited his curiosity; and the next moment, to my horror, I saw him turn up by the side of my bed, and come dancing along with a dainty, sidling motion, to examine into the cause of the noise. His broad white tail was elevated, and jauntily flirted from side to side as he approached. In fact, his approach was the sauciest and most provokingly deliberate thing conceivable. As every step brought him nearer to my face, the impulse I felt to bolt head-foremost through the opposite side of the tent, was almost irresistible; but I well knew that any sudden motion on my part, whilst in such close proximity to the rascal, would be very apt so to startle him as to bring upon me that which I was seeking to escape, and of which I was, in truth, in mortal dread; whilst, on the other hand, I was equally aware that my safety lay

in keeping perfectly still, for it was quite probable that the animal, after having satisfied his curiosity, would, if uninterrupted, quietly take his departure. The trial was a severe one, for the next moment the upright white tail was passing within a foot of my very face. I did not flinch, but kept my eye upon it, although the cold sweat broke out upon my forehead in great globules. At length the fellow finding nothing to alarm him, turned about and with a sidelong motion danced back again to the mess-basket. Finding now that he had no thought of taking himself away, I exclaimed internally, 'Mortal man cannot bear a repetition of what I have just experienced!' and laid my hand upon my rifle, which stood at my head. I weighed the chances of killing the animal so instantly dead that no discharge of odour would take place; but just at this moment he succeeded in raising the top of the basket and I heard his descent among the spoons. 'Ha! ha! old fellow, I have you now!' I said to myself; and the next instant I was standing on the top of the mess-basket, whither I had got without the slightest noise, and where I now heard the rascal rummaging my things little suspecting that he was at the time a prisoner. I called my servant—a negro. George made his appearance, and as he opened the front of the tent paused in surprise at seeing me standing *en dishabille* on the top of the mess-basket. 'George,' said I, in a quiet tone, 'buckle the straps of this basket.' George looked still more surprised on receiving the order, but obeyed it in silence. I then stepped gently off, and said, 'Take this basket very carefully, and without shaking it, out yonder, in front, and set it down easily.' George looked still more bewildered; but, accustomed to obey without question, did as he was directed. After he had carried the basket off to a considerable distance, and placed it on the ground, he looked back at the door of the tent, where I still stood, for further orders. 'Unbuckle the straps,' said I; it was done. 'Raise the top of the basket:' he did so; while at the same time, elevating my voice, I continued, '*and let that d——d Skunk out!*' As the last words escaped from my lips the head and tail of the animal appeared in sight, and George, giving vent to a scream of surprise and fear, broke away like a quarter-horse, and did not stop until he had put a good fifty yards between himself and the mess-basket. Meanwhile, the Skunk, with the same deliberation that had marked his previous course (and which, by the way, is a remarkable trait in the character of this animal), descended the side of the basket, and, with tail erect, danced off in a direction down the creek, and finally disappeared in the bushes. I then, having recovered from a good fit of laughter, called to George, who rather reluctantly made his appearance before me. He was still a little out of breath, and with some agitation, thus delivered himself, 'Bless God, massa, if I had known

there was a Skunk in the mess-basket, I never would have touched it *in this world!* 'I knew that well enough, George, and that was the reason I did not tell you of it.'

"It is only necessary further to say that the animal, having been neither alarmed nor provoked in any way, did not on this occasion emit the slightest odour; nor was any trace left in my tent or mess-basket, to remind me afterwards of the early morning visitor at my camp on Cottonwood creek."—Philadelphia, June 24th, 1851.

We have heard of some cases in which this Skunk, having penetrated into the tents of both officers and men, on our southwestern frontier, has been less skilfully managed, and the consequences were so bad as to compel the abandonment of even the tents, although soused into creeks and scrubbed with hopes of destroying the "hogo."

GEOGRAPHICAL DISTRIBUTION.

This species exists on the western ranges of the mountains in Mexico. The specimen described by LICHTENSTEIN was obtained by Mr. DEPPE in the mountains to the northwest of the city of Mexico. The animal was seen by Col. G. A. McCALL in New Mexico, between Los Vegas and Santa Fé. The specimen figured by JOHN W. AUDUBON was obtained near San Antonio, and he describes it as common in the western parts of Texas. It is not found in Louisiana, nor near the sea-shore in Texas. It will, we think, be found to inhabit some portions of California, although we cannot state this with certainty.

GENERAL REMARKS.

There are several species of this genus, which are found to vary so much in the distribution of their colours that many mere varieties were described as new species, without any other characters than those presented by the number of stripes on the back, or the predominance either of black or white spots on the different portions of the body. BUFFON described five species. Baron CUVIER, in his "Ossemens Fossiles," took much pains in endeavoring to clear up the difficulties on the subject of these animals; yet, owing to his not possessing specimens, and his too great dependence on colour, he multiplied the number of some species which are now found to be mere varieties, and omitted others which are unquestionably true species.

Audubon, John James and Bachman, John. 1854. "Mephitis macroura, Large-tailed Skunk [Pl. CII, male]." *The quadrupeds of North America* 3, 11–16.
<https://doi.org/10.5962/p.322483>.

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