

THE GENTLE WOOD-PUSSY

*carries a scent gun  
as he would not scent gun*

We were standing on the hill below our house overlooking the Willamette River. The round October moon was a sure sign that animals would be on the hunt and growing fat and furry for the winter. The branches of the fir swayed and there was a stir among the maple leaves. As I turned my nostrils to the wind, the message came in an unmistakable odor. It was not unpleasant. It never is in the open field or here on the slope above the river.

The next day when my neighbor passed, he said he was going to block up the hole under his chicken yard fence. He, too, had read the sign on the wind and was sure a skunk was in the neighborhood. He is of farmer stock, the kind that kills skunks. I was hoping a wood-pussy might someday take up a homestead on our wooded hillside.

Two species of skunk live in Oregon. One may see both kinds along a paved highway where they have been flattened out by racing automobiles. The little spotted skunk is about the size of a silver-gray squirrel. The striped skunk is two or three times as large. Polecat is another name that has been given to the skunk family as a whole. However, this name is not correct for the true polecat is an animal of the Old World.

In your natural history, you may read that this is a feeble animal, almost defenseless. Almost! But not quite. Poor little wood-pussy! He cannot run very fast. In the face of danger he just stamps his feet, humps his back like a pinched wasp and turns his tail.

One day we crossed the river and on the trail up the hillside came to the upturned roots of an old fir. Here we met a striped skunk with her seven little kittens playing in the grass on the sloping bank. As I approached slowly, they stopped to look at me but were not afraid. Within six feet of the mother, I reached over slowly and petted one of the little skunks. He merely ambled up the bank. These animals are more friendly and reliable than most people think. They are not looking for trouble and are generally the last to start any.

Two days later passing the same place, I found the bodies of five of the kittens lying along the bank where someone had killed them with a stick. So often this is the story of a family of wood folks. The damage a skunk does is often exaggerated. He feeds on various kinds of insect life, also birds, mammals, fish and even reptiles and fruit.

There is an old story that if you pick up a skunk by the tail, he cannot eject his scent with his feet dangling in the air. In eastern Oregon a trapper came upon a young skunk under a bush. He struck the branches with a stick, and the youngster retaliated by using his scent gun. He did this several times until the supply of ammunition was exhausted. No one has yet discovered just how rapidly a skunk can manufacture his scent. But in this case when the trapper picked him up by the tail, the little wood-pussy still had a final shot in reserve, so the prescription did not work.

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