

STRIPED COAT
the Skunk

Real Animal Stories

by Joseph Wharton Lippincott

Bun: A Wild Rabbit

Red Ben: The Fox of Oak Ridge

Gray Squirrel

Persimmon Jim: the 'Possum

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STRIPED COAT the Skunk



by
Joseph Wharton Lippincott
Illustrated by the author

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Note to modern readers—

Because I wanted this to be a book you could feel comfortable putting into your children's hands, one word has been replaced from the original text with the word "kitty" throughout the book (over 40 times throughout the story).

Please see nofearschoolhouse.com/stripedcoat to see exact changes.

Kind regards,

Brittany



Standing once more in front of the stone pile he shook himself until his fur stood out all over him, that fur for which any dealer would give a big price.

INTRODUCTION

LEST I be misunderstood in calling this wonderful little animal man's best friend among the furry creatures of the wood, let me at the outset draw attention to the fact that, far from putting a bounty on its destruction as some people might think desirable, many states have laws protecting it, as much for its usefulness to the farmers as for the value of its very beautiful fur.

The large black and white striped skunks we or our pet dogs often encounter, sometimes to our disaster, belong only in North America. Our friend Striped Coat was one of these. In the southern and western states lives also a little cousin of his—the spotted skunk—whose fur though attractive is not so valuable; but neither he nor the broad-striped skunk of Central and South America enter the pages of this story, for Striped Coat lived his life farther north than the range of either.

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All of the skunk family still seem to be considered unpleasant and almost unmentionable creatures merely because of their ability to throw in self-defense a liquid, in the form of a spray, possessing anything but the fragrance of roses. Admitting that the odor is indescribably awful and that to get it on one's clothing is anything but a reason for joy, it may still be claimed that the skunk himself is by no means a "smelly" animal and that his recourse to this means of defending his life is quite permissible as proved by our own methods of warfare.

In the ocean the otherwise defenseless little squid, when attacked, throws out a dark liquid which spreads in the water and either blinds its pursuer momentarily or so confuses his vision that the active squid has time to escape. It is the same thing in the case of the skunk. Let a fierce dog rush at him, and when a show of his little teeth and a brave stand have failed to save the poor fellow,

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deny him if you can the right to use as a last resort this stinging, pungent musk which, properly aimed at the eyes of his big enemy will have just enough effect to allow him a safe and bloodless retreat.

I do not doubt that there are many skunks who have never had occasion to pollute the air in this way. Several have lived for years in drains around my country home, and because my dogs are tied at night, have only twice made their presence known by throwing musk—once when one of their number was run over by an automobile and once when some kind of a fight occurred among the animals feeding together at night around the garbage barrel.

That they have done me great service in killing rats, field mice, beetles and grubs, is only too evident. On all sides are small holes in the earth and otherwise unobtrusive signs of their diligence on my behalf. They are my friends and I am theirs. To me no other pretty creature of the woods is

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more interesting.

In the past the skunk has been badly treated by authors. It was so easy to take a humorous but barbed fling at the poor wood kitty! But that day is past, for facts will out and our debt of gratitude is too great longer to be ignored. If my own words in tracing a part of the life history of Striped Coat, prove at all illuminating, I shall be happy. I have come across several skunks of his peculiar marking; one of them, partly tamed, is shown in the illustrations; but the story itself is largely fictional though following throughout the habits and true characteristics of these wild little friends of man. Belonging as they do to the elusive weasel tribe and being largely nocturnal in their habits, to chronicle all the actual happenings in the natural, wild life of one of them would seem an impossible task.

Including this little creature in my wild animal series is somewhat contrary to the advice of my publishers who naturally believe in "best sellers"

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rather than in “best smellers,” but I have a fond hope that Striped Coat will win his way with readers to a place beside Bun, Red Ben, Gray Squirrel and those to follow. I might add that a young skunk readily becomes a very tame, unusually interesting and beautiful pet, a safe one however only if accidents are provided against by “disarming,” that is, by the removal of the two scent sacs.

J.W.L., BETHAYRES, PA.

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CHAPTER I

THE WOOD KITTY'S JOURNEY

THE full moon was shining over the narrow waters of Goose Creek. Here and there, its light slipped between the seemingly endless branches of the cedars, pines and oaks, and lay in silvery patches on the sand along the banks and on the carpet of dead leaves which extended from either side of the stream on and on, into the big silent woods. Wherever the light could not pierce the foliage, there were black shadows in streaks and squares and checker board patterns—black on white, white on black—just two colors all through the quiet woods.

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But presently one of these patterns seemed to move. The keen round eyes of



Screech Owl who was perching on a dead limb overhead, soon made out the form of an animal, about the size of a small cat, moving quietly along the woods path; but even Screech Owl had to look very hard, for this little animal was all black and white itself and therefore like a part of the woods carpet.

Along the path it ambled until another animal about the same size but gray in color appeared from the opposite direction. Then the little black and white one slowed down to a walk until the other, a 'possum, had passed, but it might have been noted that it was the 'possum which

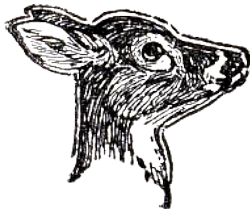
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moved out of the path. When, a little further on, a larger animal, Gray Fox, came trotting through the shadows and not seeing the black and white one, nearly bumped into it, the haste with which Gray Fox leaped aside to make the way clear was almost comical. Since both Possum and Gray Fox felt such respect for the little black and white animal it was very evident that there was something most important or formidable about it.

This same feeling was even shared by two big does who with their young fawns close at heel were walking to the creek to drink. With snorts of surprise and of warning to their tender charges, they stood in the path for an instant, at bay, the young ones peeping with wide spread ears from behind their flanks. But the black and white animal, acknowledging the right of

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every woods mother to protect her young, stopped just long enough to allow the deer to see who it was and gracefully to step out of the way. Then on it ambled.



Two old coons shuffled out of the path without any hesitation, so did the mate of Gray Fox—all feared to come to close quarters with a full grown wood kitty; but a mother mink who was hungry and in a bad temper anyway, halted directly in the center of the wood kitty's trail and curled back her lips in an evil snarl which showed every tooth in her head.

The skunk, taken by surprise, slowed down to a walk, her long fur bristling just a little and her bright, beady little eyes and sharp nose trying their best to search out some reason for this menace. She had

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often passed the slim-bodied mink at a distance, and knew her well as one of the woods creatures that belonged in that part of the wood. Surely the mink recognized her.

With bushy tail raised well over her back and every muscle ready to meet an attack the skunk sidled cautiously forward. She was not afraid, but she was good natured and hated a fuss. Nearer she came, then suddenly stamped a front foot so fiercely and with such a show of anger that the mink instinctively drew back. Past her then grandly sailed the skunk in the very center of the path, all fluffed up like a ship under full sail. If she saw the furious gleam in the mink's eyes she did not show it, but went on about her business as unconcernedly as before.

It was to be sure, the custom among

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the little wild things not to interfere with anyone in the woods unless he was a playmate or unless he looked good to eat. The little gnawing tribe of grass and nut eaters, the mice, the squirrels, the rabbits and their kind nearly always looked like a good meal to meat eaters such as the fox, skunk, mink, owl, 'possum, 'coon and cat. Therefore the little nut and grass eaters always had to be careful to keep entirely out of the way of the killers; otherwise they were seen no more. But a mink would not care to eat an old skunk unless starvation stared him in the face, nor would he go outside of the mink family in search of a playmate.

These, however, were strange, exciting days for the woods folk. It was spring time and nearly all of them were hunting mates or, like the mother mink, taking care

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of families of hungry little ones. Only the wood kitty seemed all alone and unhurried as she travelled steadily through the moonlight.

Before very long, the path she followed ended in a fenced clearing. This was new to her, so she proceeded cautiously, with many stops to test the night air through her keen nose. Strange things had happened since she had been there before. Trees had been cut down and dragged into heaps; a house and a barn had been built; and worst of all for the wood kitty, the hollow stump for which she had headed so confidently all this time, was uprooted and gone from its old place. Now she too grew worried and ran this way and that hunting for this cozy, safe den which, during the Spring before, had been her home.

Well she remembered where it had

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stood, among beds of sweet fern and blackberry bushes, now all plowed under or, if their ends did stick up from the furrows, reeking with the smell of man and of his constant companion the dog.

As the poor wood kitty looked about, a new fear swept through her. It was growing light in the East; soon the shadows would be gone and she would be caught without a den far from the woodchuck burrow from which, early in the night, she had made this journey with such assurance.

She turned back, slowly retracing her steps to the edge of the wood where stood the rows of brush piles. Here she began to hunt for a temporary hiding place. The brush piles had not been there long enough to have settled into tight, safe retreats; but one of them had a base of logs under which the wood kitty found a

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narrow hole. Into this she pushed her way only to be startled by the sudden scampering of some animal which had already made this a home.

It was Bun, the woods rabbit. He was big, but his teeth and mouth were shaped for gnawing soft grass and bark, not fighting, so he made way very quickly for the skunk and waited outside until she should leave. But this she did not do, so after a while he grew impatient and peeped inside only to find her curled up in his bed of leaves fast asleep.

Bun angrily thumped his hind feet against the earth and complained a bit to himself, but finally had to go away and find another bed. He knew of several, for he was used to this kind of treatment on the part of the powerful meat eaters and was always ready for a quick change, inconve-

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nient though it sometimes seemed.

Through the day, while the sun shone warmly on the wood pile and the little birds hopped about it, there was no sign of the weary wood kitty. Once she looked out to see whether it was safe yet to make the trip back to the woodchuck's burrow, but finding the sun high overhead returned to Bun's nest. Several times she moved uneasily and pulled more leaves about her for bedding. But she did not leave the woodpile that day nor the night following, and when in the morning the birds awoke with the dawn and chirruped among the twigs, there were five wood kitties instead of one, in Bun's old nest, four of them hairless, blind babies only a few hours old, over whom the old wood kitty was already keeping faithful, tireless guard.