Raising Infant Skunks

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Description

Striped skunk (Mephitis mephitis) is one of two types of skunks found in California. They are about 25 inches long including their tail and weigh about 4-10 lbs as adults. They are mainly black with two white stripes going down their back with a white stripe on their head though you may find many variations. In the wild they generally live about six years but in captivity can live up to 20 years. The spotted skunk (Spilogale Putorius) has spots of white stripes and is much smaller than the striped skunk at about half the size.

Habitat

They are found living in the wild in the mountains and in urban settings in the city. In the wild they will den in shallow holes or burrows or hidden in brush. In the city they will den under houses or in uncleared brush.

Breeding

Skunks breed once per year producing babies between January and June. The gestation period is approximately 42 to 63 days and they usually have 3-8 babies per litter with an average of 6.

Development

Birth: Hairless, black and pink skin pattern, blind, eyes shut, ears tightly closed, weight one ounce, can crawl slightly and squeak.

Week 1: Peach fuzz begins to appear.

Week 2: Coat of short fur.

Week 3: Eyes open.

Week 4: Exploring their burrow.

Week 6: Taking short trips with their mother

Week 8: Fully weaned.

4-5 months of age: Living on their own.

Natural diet

Skunks at different elevations and in different habitats during different times of the year will have different diets. They will eat fruits, vegetables, small mammals such as mice, rats, chipmunks, ground squirrels, rabbits, snakes, insects such as snails, slugs, roaches, worms, grubs, spiders, dead animals, eggs, leaves, grains, nuts, trash and pet food left out.
Diet in rehabilitation

Infant: A variety of formulas may be used including Esbilac, Fox Valley and KMR but the author uses Esbilac.

Weaning: Add baby cereal and high quality puppy chow to formula. You can soak chow in water or put chow in coffee grinder to turn into powder then add to formula. Have a shallow sturdy bowl of water available at all times after their eyes open. Start introducing vegetables (broccoli, carrots, cauliflower...), fruit (avocado, banana, apple, grapes, berries...), chicken, fish. Raw is best but you can steam the vegetables. Raw or cooked meat. Be sure to cut into smaller pieces.

Post-weaning: 80% vegetables, fruits and 20% dog kibble, chicken, turkey and/or fish; with some cottage cheese, yogurt, rice, potato, mealworms and crickets. You can add vitamin and mineral supplements such as “Missing Link” for cats, Pet Tab and cod liver oil.

Below is a chart comparing different formulas and milks.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Type of milk</th>
<th>Solids</th>
<th>Fat</th>
<th>Protein</th>
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<td>10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1.8</td>
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</table>

Dehydration and fluid therapy

Always allow a newly arrived skunk to reach a normal body temperature before giving any fluids or food. The skunks organs cannot process food or fluids until they are warmed. If food or fluids are given to a very cold skunk, they will not have the energy to process it and may die.

Assume all skunks are dehydrated upon arrival. These are some signs of dehydration: pale, grayish gums, dry mouth, sunken eyes, whites around eyes showing, rough, spiky fur, dry scaly skin.

Some rehabbers use the "tent test" to check for dehydration. Gently pinch a small amount of skin between two fingers to form a tent. If the skin quickly goes back down, the skunk is hydrated. If the "tent" is still evident after a second or two, the skunk is dehydrated. Be sure to look at all indicators and don't rely on any one indicator to test for dehydration.

Oral administration of fluids is the easiest and fastest way to re-hydrate. Subcutaneous (Subq) injections of fluids should generally only be done if the animal is unable to swallow. Subq can cause additional stress to an already stressed animal. Legally you must consult a veterinarian for guidelines on the amounts of fluids to be injected and the frequency. You can introduce fluids orally even in an unconscious skunk with proper technique. Place one drop at a time on the tongue of the skunk and wait for the swallow reflex action. You can also tube a skunk if they are very weak or unconscious. Make sure you are experienced at tubing before you attempt this or you can go down into the lungs or burst their stomach.

I personally believe the best hydrating fluid to give to a warmed baby is Lactated Ringer's Solution for the first
few feedings. You can get Ringers from your local veterinarian. Pedialyte, Gatorade and other over the counter hydrating solutions can have too much sugar or dextrose which will actually cause more dehydration. Do not use a solution with more than 2.5% dextrose for initial hydration. You can use these fluids for hydration maintenance after they are fully hydrated. Make sure all hydrating fluids and formulas are first warmed so they feel warm to the touch but never hot, about 100-102 deg. F.

**Introduction of formula**

A baby should never instantly be fed full strength formula. This can cause digestive problems because it is not exactly the same as mothers milk or the baby may not have eaten in quite a while and not yet able to process foods. After he is warmed and hydrated you should slowly introduce formula mixed with the hydrating formula over a days time gradually increasing the ratio of formula to hydrating solution until the baby is on full formula. I suggest the following ratios for a warm and hydrated baby.

- Feeding 1 100% hydrating fluid
- Feeding 2 75% hydrating fluid 25% formula
- Feeding 3 50% hydrating fluid 50% formula
- Feeding 4 25% hydrating fluid 75% formula
- Feeding 5 100% formula

If the skunk develops bloat, diarrhea or constipation, go back to hydrating fluid only then slowly try to introduce the formula again, this time more gradually. The stools when feeding Esbilac formula should be golden-yellow, firm and well formed. If they become whiter or loose, cut back on the amount of formula until the stools are well formed again. If the baby has diarrhea for over 24 hours, consult a veterinarian. Initially the stools of a baby may be dark which is the normal stool color if fed mothers milk or the goats milk recipe.

**Feeding instruments**

You can use an oral syringe (without a needle) to give fluids orally to a skunk. I suggest a 1/2 cc syringe for pinkies (with or without a nipple depending upon your preference and the skunks), 1 cc syringe for skunks 2-3 weeks of age, 3 cc syringe for 4-7 weeks of age and 5 cc for all other skunks for initial hydrating purposes. I do not recommend any larger as it's easy to aspirate babies especially with larger syringes if they're real hard sucklers. It's better to fill up a few smaller syringes at a time then one larger syringe. You can also use a bottle if you prefer. Some will suckle, some will lap.

**Feeding technique**
While holding the baby upright but leaning slightly forward with the oral syringe angled slightly upward and forward to form a 90 degree angle with the baby, you can place the tip of the oral syringe right to the baby's lips then gently and slowly squeeze one drop for them to taste. (see below) When babies are 4 weeks of age and older they may prefer to lie prone on their stomachs while grasping the syringe in their paws. They may start to make suckling, licking or lapping motions with their mouths and tongue then you can slowly squeeze out more drops of fluid. Do not squeeze out a regular stream, instead squeeze a tiny bit then allow them to swallow that amount before squeezing more. With pinkies I go drop by drop because they are so easy to aspirate, i.e. to take fluids into the lungs by suction. If they become aspirated, they can die of pneumonia without proper treatment. Proper treatment is the use of antibiotics, generally Clavamox liquid. With older babies I will squeeze fluid slowly for one second, let them swallow that, then squeeze more. If fluids dribble out the mouth or come out the nose, you are going too fast. If fluids come out the nose, stop feeding immediately, hold them upside down for a few seconds, blot their nose with dry tissue paper then let them wait a few minutes before resuming feeding.

If the baby does not immediately suck, lick or lap the fluid, you can gently place the tip of the syringe into their mouth. It's sometimes easier to enter from the side of the mouth especially if they already have teeth. Then gently squeeze out a drop of fluid into their mouth for them to taste. It sometimes takes a feeding or two for them to catch onto the new feeding method.

**Feeding amount and frequency**

The following chart should be used as a guide for feeding baby skunks. A good rule of thumb for maximum volume amount to feed per feeding session is 5% of the skunk's body weight in grams (Sedgwick et al. 1988). This is approximate maximum stomach capacity. One half to 3/4 of the maximum is a safe amount to feed. Be sure to weigh your squirrel frequently to be able to adjust the amount of food needed and make sure that it is gaining weight.

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th># daily feedings</th>
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<td>6-8</td>
<td>2-2.5 hrs + 1 at night</td>
<td>Formula</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-4 weeks</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3-4 hrs + 1 at night opt.</td>
<td>Formula</td>
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<td>Formula and food</td>
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<tr>
<td>6+ weeks</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4-5 hrs no night</td>
<td>Formula and food</td>
</tr>
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</table>

Besides maximum stomach capacity you need to consider their total daily caloric needs. One way to figure this out is by using the Minimum Energy Cost (MEC) formula which is K x W (in Kg) to the .075 power, where K is kilocalories utilized in one day by a hypothetical 1 kg specimen. Skunks are considered placental mammals and
their K factor is 70. All of this is multiplied by a factor to get their total daily caloric needs. A growing baby skunk has a Base Metabolic Rate (BMR) of 3, sometimes 4. If they are injured or overcoming illness it will probably be 4. As this is a basic class, no need to pay attention to the math. In the back of this manual are charts which figure everything out for you based on the weight of the baby using Esbilac formula. All of these numbers, charts, recipes are merely guidelines. If your baby is urinating, defecating and growing normally, you are feeding him properly.

For proper development skunks need the proper Calcium to Phosphorus ratio. It must be 2:1 for infants, 1:1 for adults. If the baby does not get enough calcium or not in the proper ratio, they can develop Metabolic Bone Disease (MBD). It’s easy to add the necessary Calcium by grinding up Calcium tablets into dust and adding it to their food if necessary.

As soon as their eyes open and they're moving I add powdered puppy chow mixed with water to their formula. I will place this in a shallow bowl for them to lick and lap. If they are having a problem adjusting to regular foods you can slowly add baby food, puppy chow or baby cereal to their formula to make it thicker. You may need to make the syringe hole larger so it doesn’t stick. I heat up a nail over the stove while wearing an oven mitt then put that in the hole to bore it out.

Below is a list of some acceptable foods for skunks. As with everything be sure to introduce new foods gradually. I always try to make sure that there is a little food left over so I know that they're all eating enough.

Fruits and veggies: grapes, cherries, apple, melon, tomato, avocado, butternut squash, orange, broccoli, endive, turnip greens, cucumber, okra, green bell pepper, raw corn on the cob, pear, green bean, sugar pea, sweet potato, spinach, mustard greens, carrot, raw soy bean, plum, banana, kiwi, mango, strawberry, blueberry, blackberry, fig, peach, nectarine, apricot to name a few. They also like raw or cooked chicken and turkey; no red meats. Fish is also good.

Feeding tips and tricks

• Mix the powdered formulas with a fork and not a blender. The blender will get too many bubbles in the formula.
• Mix only the amount you will use that day. Warm only the amount you will feed that feeding session.
• Always make sure your hands are warm before handling babies.
• If the plunger of the syringe should stick, use a tiny bit of olive or mineral oil to keep it moving smoothly.
• Always clean the syringe out with hot water after each use to sterilize. I also use a pipe cleaner to clean out the hole if any formula accumulates. Let the syringe dry with the plunger out to make sure the syringe dries completely.
• When babies are eating solid foods and drinking from water bowls, use thick glass or ceramic ashtrays or crockery. Do not use plastic dishes which they will chew up.
• When feeding large numbers of babies, you can place the formula in a coffee cup on a heating cup warmer. Just be sure to keep babies away from the warmer.
• To keep track of large numbers of babies, after feeding and stimulating each baby, place it into a new container so you can be sure to feed all babies without feeding some babies twice.
• I like to put the baby on a piece of fake fur to feed so it feels more natural. I also put a little fabric under the middle of the fake fur piece so it will feel more like the natural nursing position if he were nursing on his mother. They feed similar to kittens with mom rolling over half on her back. It also makes it easier to get the syringe to his mouth properly.
• If you are feeding a lot of babies, try not to hunch down and over. Raise the feeding platform if necessary or
you will get a bad neck ache.

- Learn how to refill a syringe with just one hand so you can always have one hand on the baby. Never leave a baby unattended, even for a second. They can roll or crawl off the table just like human babies.

### Urination and defecation

Always stimulate baby skunks after each feeding. Some may require stimulation before feeding. If a skunk stops eating in the middle of feeding, it may need to be stimulated before continuing to feed. Use a warm, damp cotton ball, tissue or q-tip and gently pat the genitals until urine or stool is produced. You can use a slight downward stroke above their genitals to help them produce urine. You can gently press directly around the anus to help them produce stool. Be sure they are urinating and defecating at least every other feeding. Initially they may not produce much urine if they are dehydrated. They may not produce much stool if they were not fed for a while. Don't be alarmed if they do not produce stool the first day if they were separated from their mother for a while. Generally babies will urinate and defecate on their own soon after their eyes open. If baby does not, continue to stimulate.

### Housing

Infants may be kept in a pet carrier, aquarium, terrarium or small wire mesh cage with a heating pad set on low under half. Make sure the tiny babies can’t get out through the mesh holes. Give them soft fabric with no holes or string in which to nest. An incubator set at 90 deg. F with 70-80% humidity is even better for very young infants. You can use a stick-on reptile thermometer in the incubator. An incubator can be made out of a 10-20 gallon Tupperware container with ample holes in the lid or a hole cut out of the lid with wire mesh inserted so they cannot escape. Drape a towel over the container to simulate the natural darkness of a burrow.

As soon as their eyes are open and they can crawl around you can transfer them to a larger cage about 2' square. Again, make sure the mesh is small. If they can fit their head through the mesh, they will get out of the cage. As soon as they are weaned they can go to a larger outdoor cage so they can get ready for release.

Infant skunks of the same age from different litters may be raised together. Groups of no more than six can be raised together. You should never raise a solo skunk as they need to learn how to socialize, play and can bond too strongly to their caretaker. Call around and find someone with other skunks of a similar age for companionship.

Keep your caging away from the sight and sound of humans and pets so they do not become too accustomed. Limit handling of the skunks to the bare minimum for feeding and examination only. Do not talk to your skunks. You do not want them to become bonded with you, the caretaker. You do not want them to seek out human contact when they are released. If they come up to a human after release and that human thinks the skunk is trying to attack them, they may kill the skunk.

Minimum Fish & Game requirements for skunks as per minimum standards third edition 2000 are below. If the skunk is injured, you can confine them in a smaller cage or carrier to limit mobility so they will not injure themselves. As per the manual “The bottom of the cage must be secured so that the animal cannot dig out. A metal garbage can turned on its side and lined with tree trimmings or shavings can be used as a den. A large wooden box with at least a three-foot depth of pesticide-free soil should be provided for digging.” You can also just put a carrier in the cage without the door to use as a nest.

Skunks can be litter trained. They will always go in the corner of their cage. As soon as they do this place a small
high back ferret corner litter box in their cage. In the outdoor cage place cat sized litter boxes in all four corners of the cage. Clean daily.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Infant care</th>
<th>Nursing/preweaned</th>
<th>Juvie or adult outside</th>
<th>Init. inj. adult inside</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Litter) 20-Gallon</td>
<td>(Litter) 2'x4'x3'</td>
<td>(L) 6'wide x8'long x6' tall</td>
<td>(1) 3'wide x3'long x3' tall</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Handling**

When initially picking up a wild skunk baby be sure to wear gloves. If the baby is eyes open and acts aggressive, you may have to pick up the baby by the base of the tail with his anus pointing away from you and others. Then tuck his tail under his rear. He will not spray himself. Then place him in a carrier. Baby skunks probably will not spray though they can spray. Do not startle the baby with fast movement or loud noises. When they are older and ready for release, it’s better to place food in a carrier then allow them to enter the carrier on their own if they are aggressive. If they seem about to spray in the carrier, place a wet towel over the entire carrier then transport. If you do get sprayed, use “Nature’s Mirale” skunk odor remover.

**Nail Trimming**

Skunks in captivity will need their nails trimmed every two weeks. Using cat nail trimmers trim the nail to within 1/8” of the “quick.” The “quick” is the pink flesh portion of the nail. Never cut into the quick as they will bleed. To remember when to trim always deworm on the first of each month and trim nails, then trim nails again on the 15th of the month.

**Release**

Skunks in California should be released at the end of August of beginning of September when they are approximately five months old. Make sure that there will be a couple of days of good weather so they can find, renovate or build a nest. Release them near a water source such as a creek, river or lake. Make sure there is ample natural food supply and good areas for them to make a den. You can just place the carrier on the ground and open the door. If one refuses to leave the carrier, you can help him out.

**Illness and Injury**

The most common illness and/or injury in juvenile and adult skunks is being caught by a dog, owl or other predator. Second is being hit by a car. The most common ailments in baby skunks are being aspirated by the rehabilitator while nursing, diarrhea from overfeeding or constipation from inadequate hydration/stimulation.

When first booking in a new animal provide care in the following order.

1. **Treat life threatening wounds.** Apply pressure and wraps to stop bleeding and temporarily set injured limbs.
2. **Warm.** If they are not warm, their organs will not be functioning properly and they will not be able to absorb or process fluids, medication, food and they can die of shock. After treating life threatening injuries, place them in a warm, dark, small cage in a quiet area so they can relax and feel more secure for 30 minutes to an hour.
3. **Hydrate.** If they are not hydrated, they will not be able to absorb or process foods.
4. **Begin to feed.** Introduce food to them slowly and gradually especially if they are extremely emaciated.
5. **Treat secondary illness and injury.** After they are stabilized, treat secondary injuries and illness such as parasites, set broken bones properly and clean the squirrel if necessary. If you treat every ailment of the skunk all
at once, it may be too stressful.

**Predator wounds:** Clean and flush punctures and lacerations thoroughly using Povidone-iodine 10%. Flush with a monoject curved tip syringe. If wound is already infected, lance wound with scalpel or lancing instrument, press out pus then flush thoroughly with iodine. Leave at least a 1/4 inch hole for drainage. Administer antibiotics: baytril injectable solution 2.27%, oral amoxycillin or oral clavamox. Use amoxycillin for infants.

**Road rash:** If a skunk is clipped by a car and thrown, he will have road rash. If it is severe, use lidocaine 10 mg/ml before cleaning wound. Flush wound with sterile saline then iodine to remove dirt and road debris. Administer antibiotics. Use triple antibiotic ointment with pain reliever on wound. If the eyes were also injured, use Terramycin ointment. Apply with a q-tip gently yet directly to eye.

**Poisoning:** Rat/ground squirrel poison. Administer Vitamin K and fluids. 2 mg/kg at least once or twice daily for at least four days.

**Head trauma/spinal injury:** The only real treatment is supportive care, confinement and small doses of steroids. Oral or injectable Dexamethasone 2 mg/ml .2-.3 mg/lb. day one, .1-.2 mg/lb. day two, .05-.1 mg/lb day three.

**Dehydration:** Fluids. Lactated ringers is preferable 100% oral if possible. Oral fluids get into the system within 20 minutes with minimum expenditure of energy. Subq fluids take up to two hours to absorb, cause the animal more stress and expend more valuable energy. Subq only if you cannot give orally. Tubing a skunk is only recommended if someone is very practiced. Gatorade and unflavored Pedialyte may also be used orally.

**Emaciation:** If the animal is severely emaciated, introduce foods that take little energy to process such as simple sugars, dextrose or glucose and amino acids in liquid form. They also may need probiotics, Bene-bac to replace gut flora that has died off from lack of food. Slowly introduce easy to digest foods such as Nutrical mixed with hydrating fluids. Do not give them the maximum amount as per the feeding chart based on their weight or you can overtax their weakened system. Start with half of the recommended kcal and gradually work up to the 5% rule of thumb figure. Their stomachs also would have shrunk so it may need to slowly stretch back to normal size.

**Diarrhea:** Diarrhea is a sign of an underlying problem. You must treat the underlying cause. If the diarrhea is white or mustard yellow and is watery, mucousy or bubbly, it could have been caused by overfeeding the infant patient or introducing formula too quickly. Stop formula, go back to hydrating the baby until the diarrhea stops. Then slowly and gradually reintroduce formula. If diarrhea is greenish, it could be a bacterial infection. Have stool sample checked for parasites and ova and culture for bacterial infection. Use antihelminthic for cestode, nematode or trematode infections or a systemic antibiotic. Use Dri-tail to treat the symptoms of diarrhea.

**Constipation:** This is also a sign of an underlying problem. Insufficient water in the diet or an obstruction may cause the animal to be unable to have a bowel movement. Infants must of course be stimulated regularly before and/or after feedings until their eyes open. Offer additional water or clear liquids. Laxatone (cat hairball remedy), mineral oil, olive oil may also be given in moderation to soften stool and ease constipation. If there is blood or clots in the stool, there may be intestinal injury, blockage, intestinal twisting caused by fatal bloat or genetic disorder or damage. Human baby liquid glycerin enemas can be given gently using a smooth tip 1/2 cc syringe with a tom cat catheter with end clipped off and sanded/made smooth. If enema does not release easily, do not force. High fiber and oily foods like avocado may also help.

**Gas/bloat:** Sign of underlying problem generally formula being introduced too quickly or intestinal blockage.
Mylicon human baby gas drops, 1-2 drops for babies before meals or hydration. Warm baths, gentle massage of the abdomen and back.

**Aspiration:** It’s easy for baby skunks to get fluids into their lungs while feeding on a syringe or bottle. One needs to feed the baby slowly and carefully with a small syringe. If formula does come out of their nose, turn them upside down and blot formula off their nose a few times. Wait a few minutes before resuming feeding. If you hear a clicking sound when they breath, they seem weak, are not that interested in eating, they may be aspirated and have pneumonia. Give them clavamox or amoxycillin at the first sign of aspiration. Continue for a few days. If they are not hungry, give them fluids only after they are better.

**Parasites:** As with most mammals, skunks can carry an assortment of parasites. They can have regular dog and cat fleas, mites, ticks and lice. Always quarantine new patients. You can use flea and tick spray for small animals such as Ultra-care sprayed on a cotton ball and gently wiped over their body starting around their eyes and ears so the animals will not run in there and hide. You can also use mite and lice spray for birds, Scalex. Use as above. You can also use Advantage or Frontline. Just one drop on furred babies and two drops on adults on the back of the neck. You can put the Advantage on the bedding of hairless babies away from their face. You can also first wash the baby with kitten safe flea/tick shampoo.

Skunks also get intestinal parasites such as round worms or hook worms. Begin deworming the baby using Evict or Strongid dewormer at 4 weeks of age. Deworm again two weeks after first deworm then deworm monthly until release. This is very important because round worms can be deadly to cats and humans. You must always wash your hands after touching the skunks, cleaning their cage or handling feces. All caging must be sterilized using a steamer and bleach solution.

**Zoonoses:** As with any other warm-blooded mammal, they may also have rabies. Skunks are vector animals. This is rare. Isolate any squirrel showing signs of neurological disorder in the absence of known head trauma. Use proper hygiene precautions to avoid exposure. If the animal dies, have the head tested by the State Health Department to determine if rabies was the cause of death. Rehabilitators should have pre-exposure rabies shots if they deal with high-risk species, vector animals, such as skunks, raccoons, foxes, coyotes and bats.

**Literature cited**


**Supplies**

The Squirrel Store  
http://www.thesquirrelstore.com  
Almost all supplies needed

Dr. Fosters and Smith  
http://www.drsfostersmith.com  
Fish amoxycillin

Petco & PetsMart
SKUNK FEEDING CHART
BMR x 3, Esbilac 1:2 water

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<tr>
<th>Body Wt Gms</th>
<th>BMR Kcal/day</th>
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ANIMAL ADVOCATES
359 N. Sweetzer Ave., Los Angeles, CA 90048
(323) 651-1336
www.AnimalAdvocates.us
E-mail: Mary@AnimalAdvocates.us

ANIMAL_______________________________SEX____________AGE________DATE_________________________
LOCATION FOUND_______________________________________________________________________________
HISTORY (date found, why picked up, prior food, care, etc.)
_______________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________
_______________________________________________________________________________________________
YOUR NAME_________________________________________________________________________________
YOUR ADDRESS_____________________________________________________________________________
CITY, STATE, ZIP_____________________________________________________________________________
PHONE (       )__________________________________EMAIL______________________________________
How did you hear about us? Who referred you?_____________________________________________________
I understand animals transferred to the above facility are, if possible, to be rehabilitated and released to the location
found. There are no salaries at Animal Advocates and we are responsible for any and all cost of gas, retrieving, medical
expenses, treating, rehabilitating, etc. of all animals. Any donation you care to make will help us cover these expenses
and is 100% tax deductible and greatly appreciated. Your information will never be used for spam.

DONATION
$______________________SIGNATURE______________________________________________________

TREATMENT RECORD

Initial exam/condition

Date              Treatment                                       Medication                     Weight                    Condition

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