

School-to-Nature



Shrew

The Shrew is a rodent, a small mammal that can be from mouse-size (3 inches) to the size of a small rabbit (7 inches), depending on which of 30 species in the U.S. They are identified from their extended, soft-appearing noses. Shrews range throughout Wisconsin, and they live in many habitat areas including Conservancy lands. They prefer to live in an area of thick fallen-leaf litter (duff). They are closely related to Moles. Shrews can be destructive near homes, just like mice. Shrews are fast and aggressive when threatened, making them hard to catch.

Shrews usually live in tunnels already made by other rodents. A nest area is created underground, and the female raises one or two litters of young per season. Another area carved out in the tunnel is used for winter food storage. Shrews do not defecate in their tunnels, going outside for that. Shrew babies know to follow their mother until they are 2-3 months old; and are sometimes photographed as you see here, nose to tail for safety.



The Shrew uses echolocation to get a sense of their territory, unlike some other animals who use echolocation to hunt for food. The Shrew's main diet is insects, earthworms, slugs and spiders, but they also consume small animals, seeds, roots and other vegetable matter. They can detect prey as deep as 12 cm, around 5 inches, beneath the ground. They have sharp incisors allowing them to eat many kinds of food. For hunting the Shrew can produce a type of poison in the salivary gland, which is not dangerous to humans, but painful.

Shrews have a very interesting winter strategy. After gaining maximum size, their entire body, organs, and brain, actually shrink in size, 40% in some cases, for cold weather survival. They do not hibernate, but continue to feed and may eat every 3-4 hours in order to maintain body heat. When warmer weather returns, they re-grow in size. Scientists consider shrews a unique species for the way they cope with winter. A Shrew's life span is 1-2 years.

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