

Field Vole

Microtus agrestis (Linnaeus, 1761)

Order: Rodentia

Typical blunt-nosed chubby vole shape with small rounded ears. The rather shaggy coat is yellowish grey and paler underneath. The tail is about $\frac{1}{3}$ rd the length of the body and is the same pale brown all over. Field voles tend to be a little larger than bank voles, at up to 40g weight and a body length of up to 12cm.

Field voles create characteristic runs through grassland under cover. At feeding sites they may leave small heaps of nibbled grass stems 2-3 cm long cut at 45° often with small piles of 6-7mm long cylindrical green odourless droppings.

The bank vole has a neater red/brown coat and the tail is longer, about $\frac{1}{2}$ as long as the body. The bank vole's tail is also darker above and paler below whereas that of the field vole is uniformly pale grey/brown.



Breeding occurs from April to September and after a gestation period of about 21 days a litter of 3-7 young are produced, these are weaned after about 4 weeks. Voles may produce up to 7 litters each year and may live up to 2 years. Populations may rise rapidly during spring and dip in mid summer, possibly reflecting increased predation, before rising again in autumn. Densities of up to 100/hectare can occur at the spring peak. Field voles occur in un-grazed grassy fields, open woodland, verges, dunes and heaths where sufficient cover is available. A territory of up to 1000 M² is defended by a dominant male. The animals create a network of shallow burrows connected by covered runs. The spherical nest is built from shredded grass in tunnels or at the base of tussocks and has one or more entrances.

Grasses and herbaceous plants and occasionally insects. Food is sometimes stored in burrows. Unlike bank voles, field voles rarely climb or enter houses.

Field voles are one of Britain's commonest mammals and constitute an important food source for many carnivores. Owls, kestrels, stoats, weasels, snakes and foxes all rely on field voles for an important part of their diets. Domestic cats kill large numbers each year. Field vole numbers are thought to be declining as a result of changes in farming practices over the last 100 years. Increases in rabbit populations are also thought to be detrimental to field vole habitat by reducing grass cover. Voles may be controlled in forestry plantations where they can cause significant damage to young saplings by eating bark at ground level.

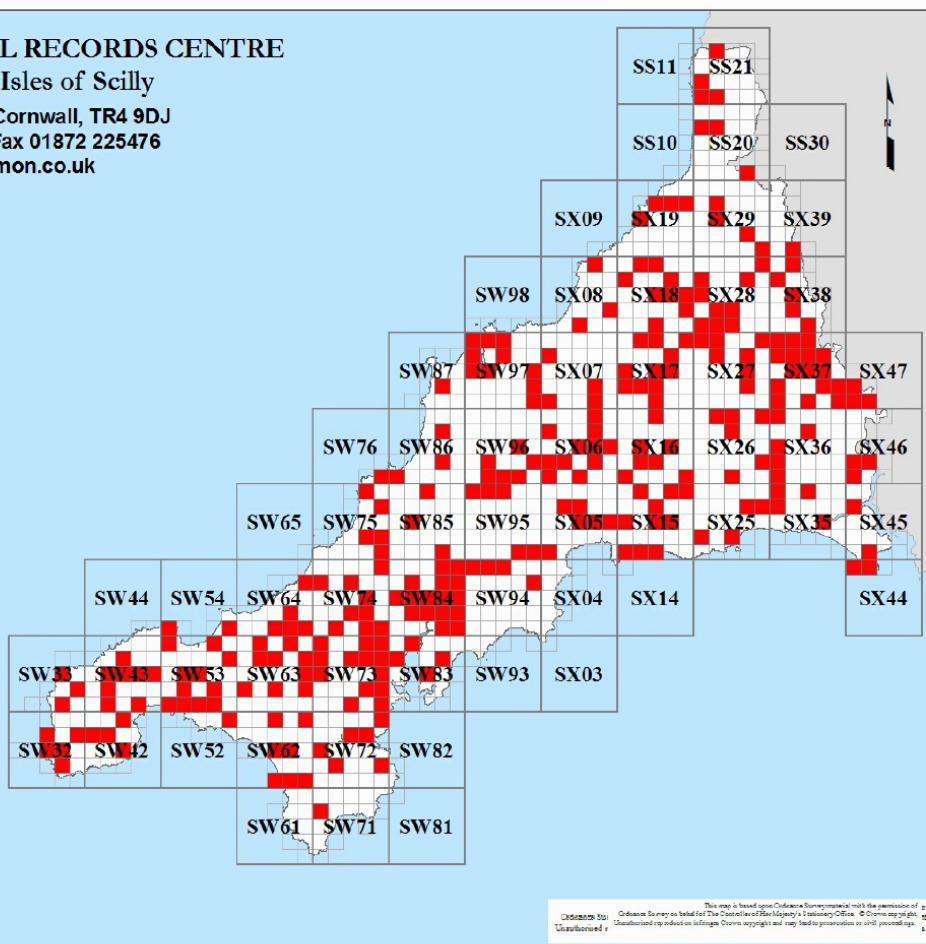


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Cornwall Mammal Group
Field vole
Microtus agrestis
As of September 2009

Legend

-  Grid 10 Km
-  Grid 2 Km (Tetrad)
-  Field vole records, 2000-2009



Local distribution and key sites

The field vole is widespread but under recorded across Cornwall.

Number of records per date class
2002 to 2006 inclusive 450
1997 to 2001 inclusive 102
All records previous to 1997 130
Total 682

Field Voles are found from the Arctic south to the Pyrenees and as far East as Lake Baikal in Russia.

Field voles are one of our most abundant small mammals, occurring across Cornwall, but indications from several sources are that numbers may be declining, possibly as a result of changes in agricultural practices. The Field Vole is not legally protected in the UK and has no conservation designation.

Survey Methods

- Small mammal trapping
- Cat kill surveys
- Field searches for runs and latrines
- Owl pellet analysis

Did you know?

Also known as the common field vole and the short-tailed (field) vole
Field voles are strongly territorial and use urine to scent mark their runways, unfortunately for them this emits ultraviolet radiation and some predatory birds can detect this.

Key references

- Flowerdew, J.(1993) Mice and Voles. Whittet Books, London.
- Lambin, X. (2008) in Harris, S. and Yalden, D.W. (Eds.) Mammals of the British Isles: Handbook, 4th Ed. The Mammal Society.