

## Common Shrew

*Sorex araneus* (Linnaeus, 1758)

Order: Soricomorpha

As with all shrews they have small eyes and ears and a long, pointed snout that is quite mobile. The common shrew has a head and body length of approximately 48-80mm, with a tail length of 24-44mm long, less than 3/4 of the length of head and body. They weigh 5-14 grams. The short, velvet-like fur is dark brown with a pale underside juveniles are a lighter brown. Around 20% of the population has distinctive white tufts on their ears. They have red-tips to their teeth. Mature females can be identified by three pairs of nipples, whilst males in breeding condition show prominent bulges that are their testes on either side of the abdomen. On occasion their high pitched squeaks can be heard from the vegetation. Whilst similar to the pygmy shrew, the Common shrew is larger and the pygmy shrew has a domed-shaped head and is a paler brown.



Photograph: Dave Groves

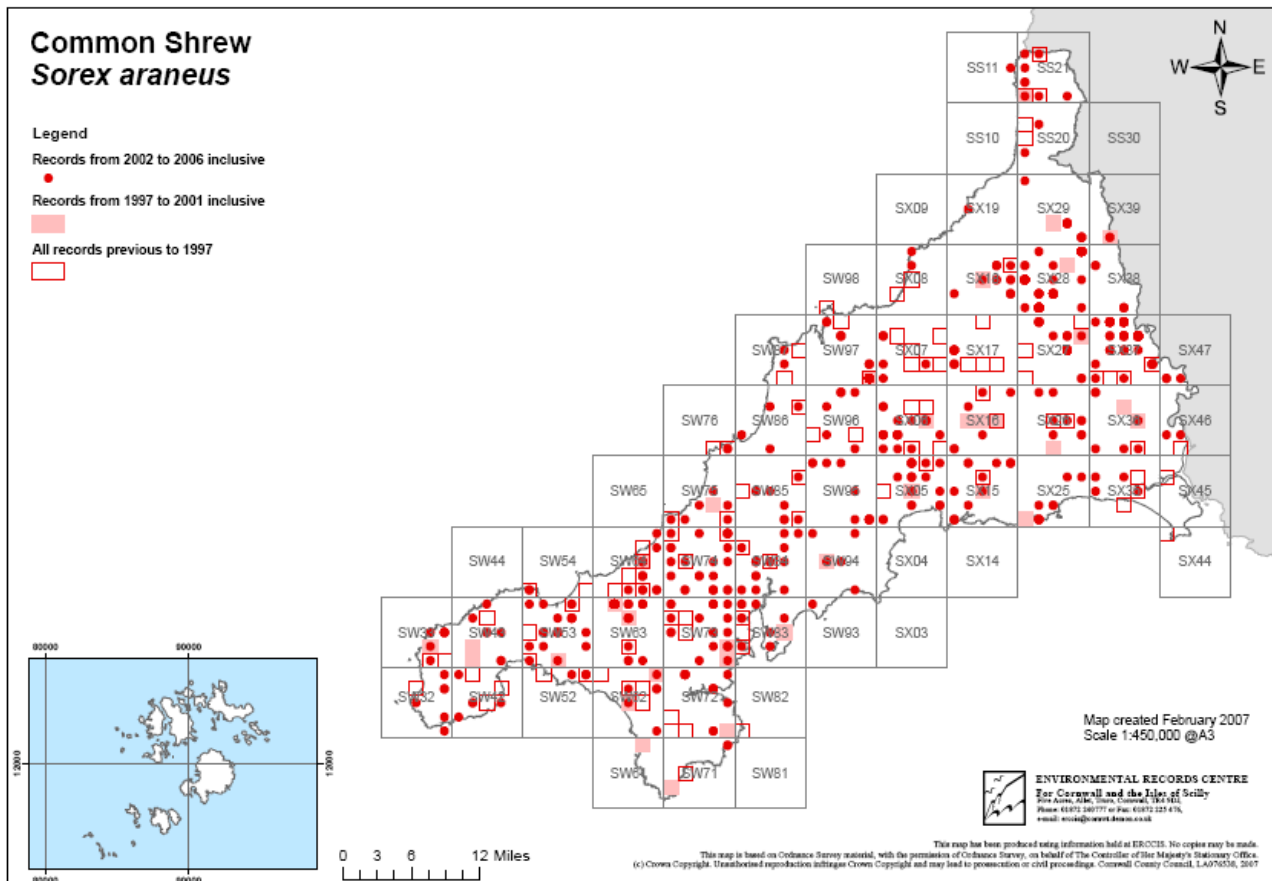
Shrews mature in the spring, and then the males begin their search for mates. Females will often resist the males advances, which results in squeaking and scuffling. Only when in oestrus will the female be willing to mate. During mating the male will hold the female and often creates a small bald patch on her nape or the top of her head. After a gestation of around 22 days, litters of 3-9 young are born, weighing about half a gram each. The young are weaned at 22-25 days. The breeding season lasts from April to September and a female may have 2-3 litters per season.

Common shrews have short life spans and are lucky to reach more than a year in age. Shrews are generally solitary animals, restricting its movements to a home range, which they mark using scent glands. Whilst there may be some overlap of these home ranges, Common shrews will fight territorially if they come in contact. The home range is usually 370-630 square metres in area. Shrews are very vocal when alarmed or agitated, some sounds can be heard by humans.

Shrews are found in dense vegetation, often in cool, damp, shady areas. It is also found in drier areas such as woodlands, scrub, hedges and even sand dunes.

Common shrews prey on terrestrial invertebrates, the most important are adult beetles, insect larvae, worms and woodlice, but will also eat slugs, snails, millipedes, centipedes, bugs and others. Shrews have a voracious appetite and need to feed every few hours, day and night and so spend most of their life foraging. Common shrews require 80-90% of their body weight per day, especially as much of their prey are mainly composed of water. The shrews mainly use their sense of smell, along with touch-sensitive snouts to locate prey. Once a food item has been caught the shrew immobilises it by biting its head.

Their main predators are owls, but they are also taken by kestrels, stoats, weasels, foxes and domestic cats. Other main threats include general habitat degradation. The accumulation of toxins through the pesticides and pollutants that are within its diet mean that the Common shrew can be used as an indicator for monitoring pollution in terrestrial habitats.



**Local distribution and key sites**

The common shrew is widespread but under recorded throughout Cornwall.

**Number of records per date class**

- 2002 to 2006 inclusive 629
- 1997 to 2001 inclusive 44
- All records previous to 1997 158
- Total 831**

The Pygmy shrew occurs throughout Europe, with the exception of the Iberian peninsular and the Mediterranean islands.

The Common shrew is common and widely distributed throughout central, northern and eastern Europe as well as western Asia. Within Britain it is found throughout the mainland, and on some of the islands. Shrews have a high mortality when live trapped and therefore in the UK it is necessary to abide by strict guidelines and obtain a licence from Natural England before trapping shrews.

Survey Methods

- Small mammal trapping
- Cat kill records
- Owl pellet analysis
- Incidental sightings – bird feeders, mouse traps, live sightings
- Hair tubes
- Corrugated iron sheets.

Did you know?

Alternative names: Eurasian Shrew, Shrew—mouse or Ranny.  
 Many superstitions surround shrews, they were thought to cause lameness if they ran over sleeping cattle. The red tips of shrews teeth is deposited iron and is thought to help the teeth resist wear.

Key references

Churchfield, S. (1990) The Natural History of Shrews. Christopher Helm Mammal Series.  
 Churchfield, S. (1988) Shrews of the British Isles. Shire Natural History.  
 Hutterer, R., Amori, G., Kryštufek, B., Fernandes, M. & Meinig, H. (2008) *Sorex minutus*. In: IUCN 2009. IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2009.1.