

## Pygmy Shrew

*Sorex minutus* (Linnaeus, 1766)

Order: Soricomorpha

The smallest native British animal weighing a mere 2.4-6.1 grams. Like other shrews they have small eyes and ears and a long, pointed, mobile snout. The pygmy shrew has a head and body length of approximately 40-60mm, with a tail length of 32-46mm long. Its short, velvet-like fur is light brown with a pale underside. They have red-tips to their teeth. On occasion they produce high-pitched squeaks, which can be heard by the human ear.

The Pygmy shrew is smaller than the Common shrew, has a domed-shaped head, is a paler brown colour and has a proportionally longer and hairier tail.



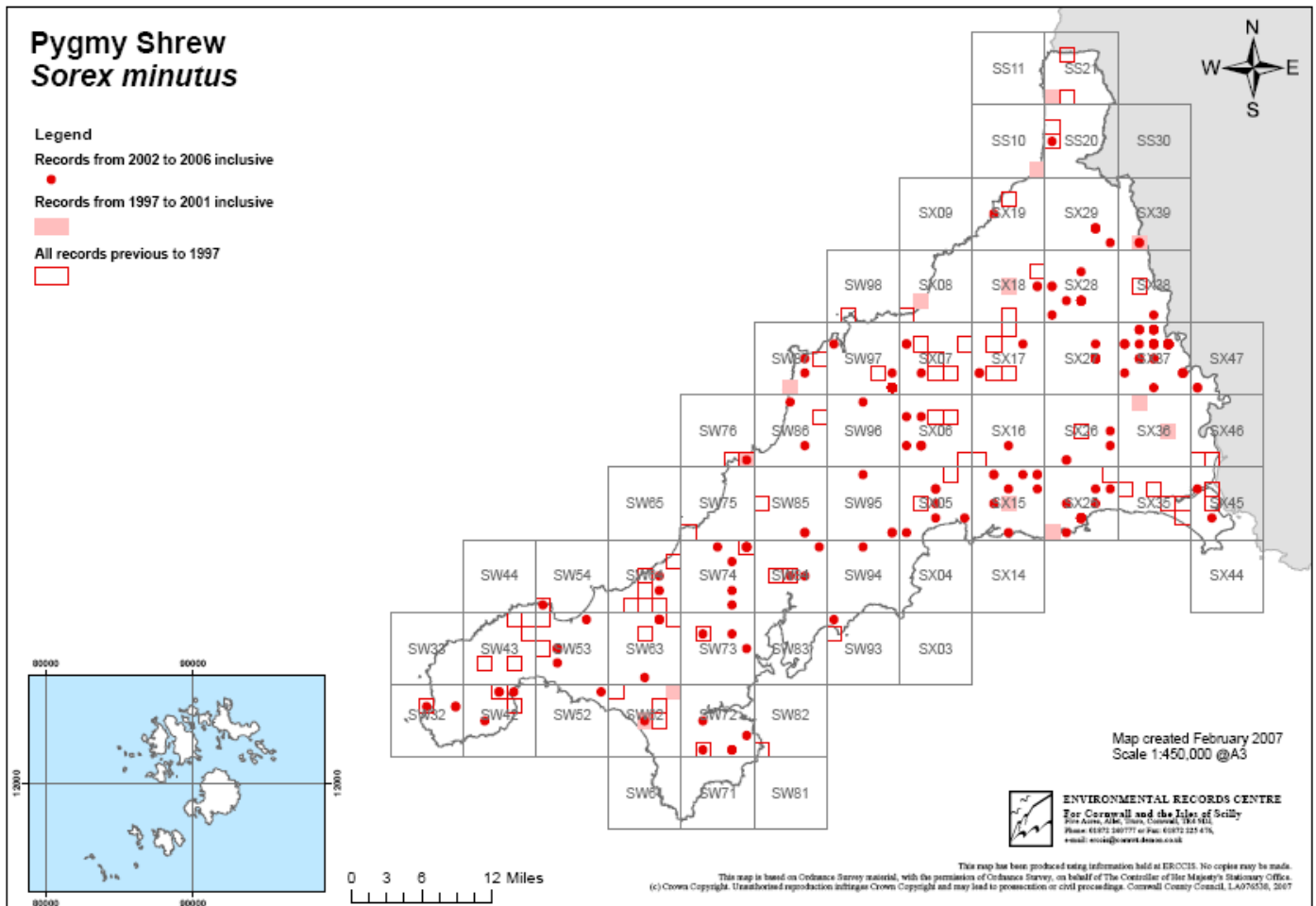
The shrew breeding season lasts from April to September, starting in spring when they become mature. The males then roam in search for females that are in oestrus and so willing to mate. After a gestation period of around 22 days, litters of 3-9 young are born, which weigh about 0.25 grams each. However, the young grow quickly and within a week are able to crawl around the nest.

Shrews must remain active throughout the year and do not hibernate.

Shrews are generally solitary animals and aggressively territorial, if shrews meet it can end in many squeaks and scuffles. Pygmy shrews, despite their smaller size, have home ranges that are larger than common shrews at about 500-1800 square metres. Shrews are found in dense vegetation, often in cool, damp, shady areas. Although they are also found in drier areas such as deciduous woodlands, scrub, hedges, grasslands, gardens and even sand dunes. The pygmy shrew shows preferences for grassland and stone-wall habitats.

The main prey of pygmy shrews include small invertebrates such as beetles, spiders, woodlice, flies and bugs, foraging amongst vegetation on the ground surface. Unlike common shrews, they rarely eat earthworms. In order to sustain its high metabolic rate, the pygmy shrew must consume the equivalent of one and a quarter times its own body weight in food each day.

Their main predators are owls, but they are also taken by kestrels, stoats, weasels, foxes and domestic cats. Other threats include general habitat destruction and indirect toxins from pollution and pesticides.



#### Local distribution and key sites

**Number of records per date class**  
 2002 to 2006 inclusive 250  
 1997 to 2001 inclusive 20  
 All records previous to 1997 105  
**Total 375**

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

The pygmy shrew is common and widely distributed across Britain and notably it is the only shrew native to Ireland.

Shrews have a high mortality when trapped and it is necessary to abide by strict guidelines and to obtain a licence from Natural England before trapping shrews. It is listed on Appendix III of the Bern Convention.

#### 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?

Also known as the Eurasian pygmy shrew or lesser shrew.  
 It was not until well into the 19<sup>th</sup> century that the pygmy shrew was recognised as a separate species, having previously been thought to be the young of the common shrew.

#### 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.