

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 40-60mm, with a tail of 32-46mm. 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 more domed head, is a paler brown colour and has a proportionally longer and hairier tail.



Shrews mature in spring and the breeding season lasts from April to September. The males search for females that are in oestrus and willing to mate. After a gestation period of around 22 days, litters of 3-9 young (weighing about 0.25 g) are born. However, the young grow quickly and within a week are able to crawl around the nest.

Shrews remain active throughout the year and do not hibernate. They 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 m².

Shrews occur 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.

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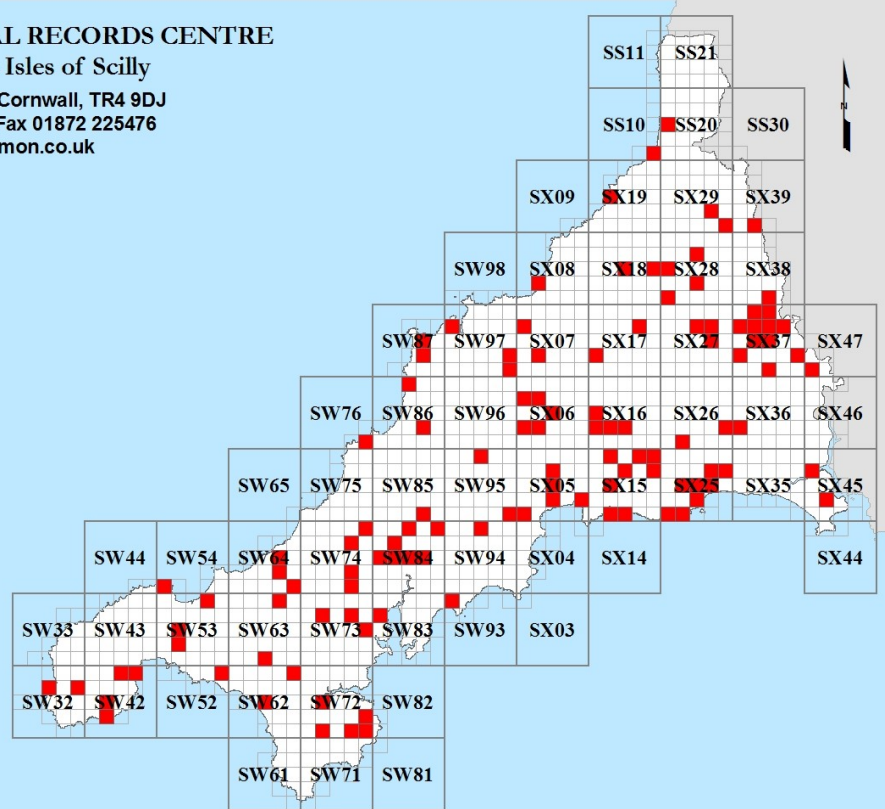


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Cornwall Mammal Group
Pygmy shrew
Sorex minutus
As of September 2009

Legend

-  Grid 10 Km
-  Grid 2 Km (Tetrad)
-  Pygmy shrew records, 2000-2009



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Local distribution and key sites

The pygmy shrew is widespread but probably under recorded throughout Cornwall.

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 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.

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Did you know?

Also known as the Eurasian pygmy shrew or lesser shrew.

Well into the 19th century it was often thought to be the young of the common shrew.

Key references

Churchfield, S. (1990) *The Natural History of Shrews*. Christopher Helm, London.

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Hutterer, R., Amori, G., Kry tufek, B., Fernandes, M. & Meinig, H. (2008) *Sorex minutus*. In: IUCN 2009. IUCN Red List of Threatened Species. Version 2009.1.