

Backyard Briefs

A weekly column

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Living Undercover

Scurrying about, beneath the litter of leaves that blanket our forests, are unique mammals known as short-tailed shrews. Most likely you have never seen one and yet they are abundant; as many as 80 animals can reside within one acre of land. There are two types of these shrews, the southern and the northern. Both reside in this region and though they are not the same species, they are so similar that only experts can tell them apart.

These critters are about three to five inches long, with short legs, minute eyes, and ears so small that they are completely hidden in thick, velvety, slate gray fur. They have long pointed noses and, of course, short tails. With glands on the flanks and rump that secrete a strong odor, some predators like foxes and bobcats are deterred, but owls, hawks and snakes are not so easily discouraged.

The metabolism of these mammals must run at a high rate (pulse rates measure 700 beats per minute) to maintain their hot body temperature, consequently they must eat at least their own weight in food every day. Always in a hurry to find dinner, short-tails have a unique adaptation to help them successfully catch prey, which is sometimes as large as they are. Short-tailed shrews are the only mammals in North America that have poisonous venom, which is secreted in their saliva. Similar to cobra venom, it can immobilize, and will also kill, even larger prey like frogs. The toxin, in the small quantities secreted, is not dangerous to humans, but is quite effective for shrew-size prey. Worms, insects, insect larva, snails and vegetable matter, along with an occasional small snake, frog or young mouse, make up this shrew's list of delectables. Short-tails are known to build a sort of pantry of paralyzed snails and other insects to munch on when food is less available.

These secretive critters most prefer to spend their lives beneath forest leaf litter, but will also live in fields, bogs and marshes. They spend their time scurrying about in trenches, digging tunnels and burrows. They also manage to produce three to four litters (of usually six or seven young) each year. They are among our most prolific North American mammals, and an excellent natural source of insect control.