

Look What the Cat Dragged In!



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By Sue Olcott

Every summer is the same. You go out the back door and discover a custom prepared gift, from your sweet little companion, laying on the door mat. It is brown. And furry. It has a little tail. And your companion gazes up at you proudly expecting praise for a job well-done, yawns hugely, pads nonchalantly into the house, and stretches out in a favorite spot as only a cat can, enjoying a warm shaft of sunlight. And you are left with the chore of disposing of the damp little body of the victim, only thankful that, at least this time, it had passed to a better place before it was brought into the house and ran under the washing machine.

The victim was likely a mouse, a mole, a vole, or a shrew. These four groups, together with bats, make up the majority of mammals in the world (almost 72% of known species). But, because they are typically nocturnal, secretive, and small, the average person knows little about them. What follows is a simple primer on some of these backyard neighbors.

Mice

Mice are members of the order Rodentia, the rodents. They are a very diverse group, but in West Virginia are characterized by their small size, long tail, and chisel-shaped front teeth that can be white or orange colored. West Virginia



Phyllis Davis

White-footed mouse

hosts seven species of which the most common is the white-footed mouse, characterized not only by its white feet, but by its large dark eyes, long whiskers, and large delicate ears. Most mice in the state live in a variety of habitats including forests, wetlands, grasslands, and backyards. One species, the house mouse, a European import, is only found around human habitation.

The fur varies by species from reddish brown and silky feeling with white under parts, to yellowish brown and coarser with tan under parts. All species except the house mouse have furred tails, with the top usually darker than the bottom.

They eat a variety of food that varies seasonally, including insects, centipedes, spiders, insect larva and pupa, fruit, seeds, and green vegetation. They play an important role in the control of insect pests such as gypsy moth.

Except for two species (woodland and meadow jumping mice), they are active year-round.

Voles

Voles are also members of the rodent order, but differ in several ways from mice. Although basi-

cally the same size with the same chisel-shaped front teeth, they have short tails, small ears almost hidden in their shaggier fur and small eyes. Six species call West Virginia home. The two most common are the meadow vole, a wholly dark brown grassland species, and the southern red-backed vole, which has warm brown fur with a rich reddish stripe down its back that lives in mature forested areas. Voles, unlike mice, are mostly herbivorous. Their diet of grasses, forbs, seeds, tubers, roots, fungus, lichens, bark, berries, and other vegetable matter is supplemented by small numbers of insects and other invertebrates. If spring flower bulbs are eaten without being dug up, these are



Meadow vole

the likely diners. They make use of extensive tunnel and/or runway systems and are active year-round.

Moles

Moles are members of the order Insectivora, the insectivores, named after one of their primary foods – insects. They are highly adapted little animals and are well-suited to their underground life. They are characterized by short, brown or gray velvety fur that doesn't lie in one direction, almost invisible eyes, no external ears, and very large, spade-shaped front feet. They are basically blind, with the eyes only thought to detect light and dark. Three species occur in West Virginia. The most common is the dark gray colored hairy-tailed mole that is mostly found in forested areas. Our most unusual species is argu-



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Hairy-tailed mole

ably the star-nosed mole. It lives in wet fields and meadows and has 22 pink fleshy appendages growing around the end of its nose. These

are used as touch sensors to help detect prey and to find their way around. Mole diets consist primarily of earthworms, insects and other invertebrates and, to maintain their high metabolism, they consume



Craig Stihler

Juvenile short-tailed shrews

more than their body weight daily. They have two types of burrows – deep permanent tunnel systems, and temporary shallow feeding tunnels. These shallow feeding tunnels are visible in lawns, forest roads and trails and typically indicate large numbers of soil invertebrates. Although active year-round, they are only seen near the surface during warmer months.

Shrews

Shrews are also insectivores, again reflecting one of their primary sources of food. This group includes the smallest mammal in both West Virginia and North America, the rarely seen pygmy shrew with a total of eight shrew species in the state. Three common species are the forest dwelling masked shrew and smoky shrew and the more open living northern short-tailed shrew. Most shrew species are smaller than mice, and are characterized by brown or gray fur that lies in one direction, small ears, long snout with long whiskers, and pointed front teeth (not chisel-shaped). The common short-tailed shrew is mouse-sized, but can be differentiated by their pointed (red-tipped!) teeth. This species also has a mild poison in their saliva

which is thought to help immobilize invertebrate prey. Because of their extremely high metabolism shrew appetites are prodigious, and they eat throughout the 24 hour day consuming invertebrates, supplemented with small mammals, salamanders, and small reptiles when they are encountered. They are active year-round.

Two other species are periodically served up by house cats. The first is the eastern chipmunk, a small striped ground squirrel common in forested areas. It can be recognized by being much larger than a mouse, the dark and light stripes running

down its back, and its bushy tail. The second is the least weasel. This is a small, long-bodied, chocolate-colored animal with a white belly and short tail. Like all carnivores, its suite of teeth includes two pairs of canines. It is the smallest carnivore in North America, only slightly out-weighting the mice it primarily preys on.

So the next time Fluffy brings you an unwanted surprise, take a moment before you open the trash can to look at, and maybe appreciate, what the cat dragged in.

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Keep Your Cat Indoors

House cats are, by definition, non-native carnivores in North America. Their ancestors are native to Asia and Africa, and were brought to North America and West Virginia by settlers primarily for rodent control around human habitation. Some still fulfill this role today on farms, but most are kept as pets in urban, suburban and rural areas. Those that are kept inside do not impact the environment, but those that are allowed to roam or have become feral (wild) contribute to the already effective predation of small mammals and birds by native predators such as raccoons, hawks, snakes and weasels.

Researchers in California and elsewhere have documented that feral cat colonies severely impact small animal populations to the point of local extirpation. To maintain a healthy and functional animal community around your house, consider keeping cats indoors and neutering them.



Sue Olcott