

Wildlife Diversity Notebook: Northern Short-tailed Shrew

By Karen McClure

Common Name:
Northern Short-tailed Shrew

Scientific Name: Blarina brevicauda

West Virginia Status:
Common statewide

Description: The Northern short-tailed shrew is the largest shrew on our continent. Adults are 3 $\frac{3}{4}$ to 5 inches long, plus they have a short tail up to one-inch long; hence the scientific name: brevi comes from a Latin word meaning short, and cauda is Latin for tail. Northern short-tailed shrews are gray all over, and weigh one-half to one ounce. That's about the same weight as four quarters.

Habitat: These shrews live in a variety of habitats, but are most common in woods and wetlands.

Diet: Northern short-tailed shrews eat mostly invertebrates such as snails, earthworms, centipedes and insects. Sometimes, they leave middens of snail shells under logs. On rare occasions, they eat smaller shrews, and have been known to eat mice when mice are abundant. These mammals also consume quite a bit of underground fungi.

Range: These shrews are native to southeastern Canada, the northeastern United States, and south through the Appalachians to the mountains of Alabama. Isolated populations exist in North Carolina and Florida. They are native to West Virginia.



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Life History: Northern short-tailed shrews have several claims to fame. They are our largest shrew, they are venomous (see *Venomous Mountaineers* in this issue for more details), and they eat from 50 to more than 100 percent of their weight in food each day. Some prey is paralyzed with venom and then stored for later.

This shrew is one of the most common mammals in North America. These tiny predators have burrows with oval openings that are less than an inch across, and even smaller in height. They dig burrows with their snout and forelegs, and they run the subterranean tunnels in the morning and evening searching for prey.

Males mark their burrow openings with liquids from their hips and belly. These territorial markings keep other males out. If two males do meet, a fight might ensue. One shrew usually rolls over like a dog, and the other male usually runs away. Females and males don't fight with each other, but form permanent bonds.

Northern short-tailed shrews shred leaves and grass to build a nest, 6 to 8 inches across, placing it under a log or stump. The female then gives birth to four to eight young. Northern short-tailed shrew litters occur mostly in spring and summer, but the female can give birth year-round.



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Northern short-tailed shrew inside a hollow log.