



## Shrews

There are four species of shrews known to occur in Rhode Island, all belonging to the Family Soricidae. Characterized by a long, pointed snout, five toes on each foot, very small eyes and ears, and soft, silky fur, they are the only family of shrews that occurs within the United States. Their upper front teeth, called unicuspid, are enlarged and protrude forward, and are very efficient for capturing small prey. The most common species in Rhode Island is the short-tailed shrew, *Blarina brevicauda*. This is most likely the one your cat brings home. These small mammals are rarely noticed and strive to remain hidden from humans and predators.

### LIFE HISTORY

**Behavior:** Shrews are fossorial, which means they are adapted to live underground. They utilize the burrows and trails of small rodents and other animals. Despite being very active, shrews are not frequently seen, spending their time below the surface of the ground or in the leaf litter. Shrews do not hibernate and remain active even in the coldest temperatures. Some species of shrews use a type of echolocation, a series of high-pitched squeaks to navigate through their surroundings and possibly to locate prey. Shrews have glands on their hind-quarters that emit a very pungent odor, possibly used as a sexual attractant. This may also make them unappealing to many mammalian predators. Hawks and owls, however, readily prey on shrews. Shrews are not long-lived, most living only 12 to 18 months at most.

**Reproduction:** Shrews can have two or three litters per year, with 2-10 young per litter depending on the species. Nests are constructed of grasses, leaves, and moss, under logs, rocks, or in shallow burrows.

**Food Habits:** Being so small, shrews have a proportionally high surface-to-volume ratio and tend to lose body heat rapidly. Consequently, they have a very high metabolic rate and must consume food almost continuously to maintain body temperature. They need to feed every couple of hours and can consume as much as three times their body weight every 24 hours. Between species, diets are variable but, all shrews consume insects in some degree.

### DID YOU KNOW?

- Though similar in appearance, shrews are not rodents.
- The northern water shrew can run on water for short distances.
- Shrews must eat frequently because of their high metabolic rate, consuming up to 3x their body weight every 24 hours.
- A fifth species, the long-tailed shrew, *Sorex dispar*, was reportedly found in RI in 1960, but the record is questionable.
- Some species of shrews use a type of echolocation to navigate through their surroundings and possibly to locate prey.
- The northern short-tailed shrew is one of the world's only venomous mammals.



# Shrew Species of Rhode Island



EPA

## NORTHERN WATER SHREW (*Sorex palustris*)

**Description:** Very dark gray with a long tail. Hind feet broad and covered with stiff hairs.

**Habitat:** Semi-aquatic. Forest streams.

**Range:** Throughout mainland RI, likely not occurring on the Bay islands or Block Island. More information needed.

**Diet:** Insects, larvae, worms, salamanders. Will dive for fish eggs, caddisfly and mayfly larvae.

**Weight:** 10-16 grams



Wikimedia

## MASKED SHREW (*Sorex cinereus*)

**Description:** Grayish-brown backside, light below. Darker during winter. Long tail.

**Habitat:** Wet meadows and brushy forest edges.

**Range:** Throughout mainland RI, likely not occurring on the Bay islands or Block Island

**Diet:** Insects, larvae, worms, salamanders.

**Weight:** 3-8 grams



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## NORTHERN SHORT-TAILED SHREW (*Blarina brevicauda*)

**Description:** Large. Slate gray coloration with short tail.

**Habitat:** Variable/suburban.

**Range:** Common throughout mainland RI, Aquidneck Island and may occur on Conanicut and Prudence Islands.

**Diet:** Insects, invertebrates, mice anything it can catch. Produce a toxic substance in their salivary glands that can immobilize or kill small prey.

**Weight:** 12-33 grams



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## SMOKY SHREW (*Sorex fumeus*)

**Description:** Brownish-gray in summer, grayish-brown in winter. Prominent ears, long tail.

**Habitat:** Shady, damp woods.

**Range:** Only a few specimens collected in West Greenwich and Glocester. More information needed.

**Diet:** Insects, worms, snails and plant material.

**Weight:** 6-8 grams