

COMMON SHREW



As its name suggests, the common shrew is the most likely species you can expect to encounter in west Dorset, although in total there are three shrew species present here. This is an abundant wild mammal, diminutive and smaller than a mouse. Its coat of dense fur has a velvety appearance, not dissimilar from that of a mole. It has tiny eyes and ears, with a pointed snout, festooned with long, bristly hairs. These stiff whiskers are highly sensitive, aiding the animal to find its way about, and helping it to locate food in dark places. This restless, energetic mammal lives a frenetic lifestyle, with a heart rate of over 800 beats per minute. It lives amongst us in our gardens and hedgerows, copses and woodlands, wherever there is plenty of low growing vegetation supporting an abundance of invertebrate prey. It is an opportunistic voracious hunter of earthworms, slugs, snails, beetles, spiders, woodlice and insect larvae. It forages for such nourishment in leaf litter or by burrowing under moss, or into decaying wood. Its sleep pattern can only be described as 'cat-napping' as it does not sleep as such, but regularly snatches just a few minutes of rest before charging off in pursuit of food.

Its high metabolic rate demands a constant supply of sustenance, as it cannot survive without food for more than an hour. It needs to consume the equivalent of at least 80% of its own body weight in food daily to sustain its hectic, dynamic way of life.

The common shrew leads a totally solitary life, with the exception of mating. Like most other small mammals, males take no part in rearing young. During its daily activities it is extremely pugnacious and aggressive towards others of its kind.

Dead bodies of common shrews are often encountered on paths or lawns in gardens. This is because they have many predators, including mustelids, hawks and domestic cats, but they are seldom eaten due to their unpalatable, nasty taste.

This is a short-lived wild animal, often described as an annual species, seldom living for more than a year. A shrew of 15 months of age would be considered elderly. Adult shrews decline during late summer, following an intensive breeding season. They tend to succumb before winter sets in, leaving offspring to perpetuate the species. During autumn, immature shrews shrink their skeletons, especially the skull and some internal organs by up to 20%. This unusual bodily function has evolved as a method for surviving the colder months of winter. Thus a smaller shrew requires less food intake, as this over-active tiny creature does not have fat deposits or stores like other small mammals.

Colin Varndell December 2025