

Species Factsheet: *Harvest Mouse (Micromys Minutus)*



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Quick Facts

Recognition: Blunt nose, small eyes, and small hairy ears in contrast to other British species of mice and also much smaller; prehensile tail the same length as the head and body; russet orange fur with a white underside.

Size: 50-70mm

Weight: 4-6 g

Life Span: 18 months on average



Distribution and habitat

The harvest mouse is mainly found from central Yorkshire southwards. Isolated records from Scotland and Wales probably result from the release of captive animals. Areas of tall grass provide favourable habitats, such as cereals, road side verges, hedgerows, reed beds, dykes and salt marshes where nests can be built.

General Ecology

Behaviour

Harvest mice are extremely active climbers and feed in the stalk zone of long grasses and reeds, particularly around dusk and dawn. Their hearing is acute and they will react sharply; they either freeze or drop into cover in response to rustling sounds up to 7m away. Harvest mice have high energy requirements, the cost of being warm blooded and coping with a high surface to volume ratio.

Breeding nests are the most obvious sign indicating the presence of harvest mice. The harvest mouse is the only British mammal to build nests of woven grass well above ground. Nests tend to be found in dense vegetation such as grasses, rushes, cereals, grassy hedgerows, ditches and brambles. They are generally located on the stalk zone of grasses, at least 30cm above ground in short grasses and up to a metre in tall reeds. The size of the nest can vary from only 5cm in diameter for non-breeding nests to 10cm in diameter for breeding nests.

Harvest mice have many predators: weasels, stoats, foxes, cats, owls, hawks, crows, even pheasants.

Diet and Feeding

Harvest mice eat a mixture of seeds, berries and insects, although moss, roots and fungi may also be taken. They sometimes take grain from cereal heads, leaving characteristic sickle-shaped remains. Noticeable damage to cereal crops is extremely rare.

Reproduction

Harvest mice usually have two or three litters a year in the wild, between late May and October, but even into December if the weather is mild. Most litters are born in August. Cold wet weather is a major cause of mortality. There are usually around six young in a litter. The young are born blind and hairless but grow extremely quickly and start to explore outside the nest by the 11th day. The young are abandoned after about 16 days, but continue using the nest which may at then start to look rather dilapidated. A fresh nest is built for each litter.

Conservation status

Harvest mice are listed as a BAP (Biodiversity Action Plan) Species because they are thought to have become much scarcer in recent years and they require conservation plans to reverse the decline. Changes in habitat management and agricultural methods are thought to be the main cause for the loss of populations from certain areas, although there have been no reliable studies to quantify this change.