
October 31, 2014

BLAMING THE SHREW

I had an interesting non-living, furry sample brought to the office in a jar this past week. It was a prize that was left on the sidewalk of a homeowner in Wilber. I looked at it and went to the back door to leave the jar in the alley, because the smell was rather strong. At a distance, my guess was a field mouse or maybe a vole or mole. But looking closer it was a shrew.

Shrews are small mammals, generally smaller than the average mouse. They have pointed snouts, very small eyes and are covered with short dense velvet fur. The teeth are small, sharp, and dark purple pigmented. Shrews are similar to mice except that mice have four toes on their front feet, larger eyes, bicolored fur, and have a short snout, rather than an elongated snout. Moles also are similar to shrews, but usually are larger and have enlarged front feet for digging. Both shrews and moles are insectivores; mice are rodents.

It had a short tail, so I assumed it was a northern shorttail shrew, an opportunistic feeder, meaning they will eat whatever they can take advantage of. Food habit studies reveal that shrews eat beetles, grasshoppers, and crickets, spiders, snails, earthworms, slugs, centipedes, and millipedes. Shrews also eat small birds, mice, small snakes, and even other shrews when the opportunity presents itself. Some species of shrews will eat seeds, roots, and other vegetable matter.

Dennis Ferraro, University of Nebraska Extension, describes the shrew often takes blame for problems caused by others. Does this sound familiar? The poor shrew gets a bum rap. Most species of shrews do not have significant negative impacts and are not abundant enough to be considered pests. Their sense of smell is thought to be poor, and the eyes are degenerate and vision is thought to be limited to the detection of light. But the shrew compensates by using echolocation and a fine sense of touch.

Shrews are mostly nocturnal. They frequently use tunnels made by voles and moles. During periods of occasional abundance, shrews may have a strong, although temporary, negative impact on mouse or insect populations. If only we could tame shrews to eliminate mice that enter our homes - but as any good Shakespearian knows, there is no "Taming of the Shrew." Many predators kill shrews, but few actually eat them. Owls, in particular, consume large numbers of shrews.

Most shrews do not cause significant negative impacts and are not usually abundant enough to be considered pests. They may actually eat mice and voles that are causing landscape damage. Shrews rarely conflict with humans, however, some may consume grain products (back to that opportunistic feeder concept).

Domestic cats appear to be very good predators of shrews, although they seldom eat them (presumably because of the shrew's unpleasant odor). Cats may be effective at temporarily reducing localized shrew populations living in poor cover around structures. Cat owners may find dead, uneaten shrews brought to the doorstep or inside the home. Dispose of dead shrews by placing a plastic bag over your hand, picking up the dead animal, turning the bag inside out while holding the shrew, sealing the bag, and discarding it with the garbage or burial in your yard. Using a plastic bag in this manner reduces the potential for flea, tick, helminth parasite, or disease transmission.

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