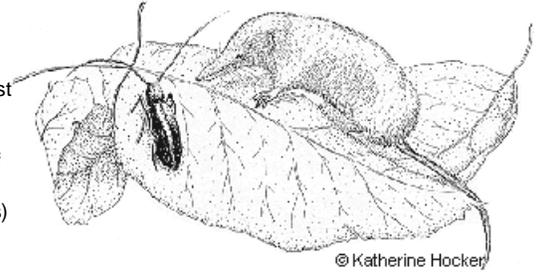


## Shrews

Shrews are the smallest of the mammals. They are often mistaken for mice but are insectivores, not rodents. There are currently ten species of shrews known in Alaska. To most people they all look alike; but to experts, each has a different skull characteristic or lives in a restricted area. They are found throughout Alaska, even on some isolated islands. As yet no shrews have been found on the Aleutian Island chain west of False Pass.

**General description:** All species of shrews in Alaska belong to one family, Soricidae, and are members of one genus, *Sorex*. The family is distributed throughout the world except Greenland, Australia, southern South American and some Pacific islands. Shrews are small, ranging in size from 74-158 mm (3-6.5 inches) total length. Their tails are typically from one-quarter to one-half of their length. They weigh from 1.5-20 grams (a penny weighs 3 grams). Most are a grayish-brown coloration with a paler colored belly. Some are distinctly bicolored. Shrews are short-legged and have a long pointed nose with long whiskers. Their teeth are tiny, white with reddish-brown tips, but sharp for attacking and eating prey. Their tails are hairy in young shrews but usually naked in old adults. Shrews have musk glands that give off a strong odor, especially when handled. Their eyes are tiny and vision is poor, but they have acute senses of smell and hearing.



**Distribution and life history:** Shrews live in all habitats in Alaska from the rain forests of Southeast to the arctic tundra. Most of the species are genetically related to other species in Asia or North America. Shrews have not been so intensively studied as other mammals, and their distribution is not exactly known. Two of the species, the **St. Lawrence Island shrew** (*Sorex jacksoni*) and the **Pribilof Island shrew** (*S. hydrodromus*), live only on their respective islands. The **Glacier Bay water shrew** (*S. alaskanus*) is known from Glacier Bay National Park and Preserve in southeast Alaska. The **barrenground shrew** (*S. ugyunak*) lives on the North Slope and is related to Asian shrews, as is the **tundra shrew** (*S. tundrensis*) which lives throughout most of Alaska except for the Southeast. Two shrews, the masked or **common shrew** (*S. cinereus*) and **dusky shrew** (*S. monticolus*), are the most widespread, occurring from the crest of the Brooks Range through Southeast Alaska. The **water shrew** (*S. palustris*) has been found in the Alaska Range south through Southcentral to Southeast Alaska. The **pygmy shrew** (*S. hoyi*) occurs through most of Alaska except on the North Slope and Southeast Alaska. A recently identified species unique to Alaska, the **tiny shrew** (*S. yukonicus*), is only known from a single specimen found at Galena on the Yukon River.

Shrews are solitary except when breeding, mainly terrestrial, and live under the grass and leaf litter. They are active throughout the year and burrow through the snow during the winter. Most shrews prefer moist habitats, and the water shrew is often found in streams, ponds, and marshes.

The breeding season is from March to August. Two to 10 young are born after a 17 to 28 day gestation period. The young are born naked and blind in a nest of grass. The young are weaned after 3 weeks. Females generally have several litters per year. Shrews live from 12 to 18 months.

**Food and predators:** Shrews eat insects, spiders and other small invertebrates. Some species are dependent upon plant matter, but most will eat any kind of meat. If two shrews are caught in a enclosed area, such as a tin can, one will kill and eat the other. In western Interior Alaska, shrews will feed on blackfish that have come to the surface at holes in frozen-over lakes.

Shrews are taken by a variety of weasels, marten, fox, domestic cats, and other shrews. Because of their odor they may be left and not eaten after they are killed. Great horned, great gray, boreal, and hawk owls have all been recorded preying on shrews in Alaska.

Shrews have a variety of parasites on and in them. Fleas and mites live on their outer surface and nematodes and cestodes live within them. One parasite which lives within the diaphragm of shrews spends part of its life cycle infecting marten.

**Conservation and management:** Shrews are unclassified game in Alaska with no closed season and no bag limit. In agricultural areas they are beneficial because they may eat insect pests. In some areas shrews are a pest because they will eat any meat and are able to climb up on shelves and eat meat which has been left uncovered.

With the possible exception of the Pribilof Island shrew, none of Alaska's shrews have any conservation problems. If the habitat is vastly altered, the Pribilof Island shrew, which is restricted to St Paul Island of the Pribilof Island group, may become rare.

Scientists still debate over the identity and genetic relationships of some shrew species. As a result, the specific names have been changing and older publications may have different names for our shrews. Scientists who study shrews use pitfall cans to catch them. There are still many particulars about Alaska's shrews which are unknown such as exact distribution, breeding cycles, and numbers.

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