



## HARVEST MICE

**Our smallest native rodent, the tiny harvest mouse weighs the same as a 2 pence piece, about 5 grams, with a body just 8 centimetres long. Although so small, they are expert climbers, using their hairless, prehensile tail, the same length as their body, to help them cling to the stalks of long grasses. They live in reed beds, grass, wet meadows, hedgerows and farm crops of wheat and oats. They are well camouflaged, and hide themselves in dense vegetation to avoid detection by predators, detecting them with their excellent hearing. They have rather poor eyesight, although their large eyes are positioned on the side of their head to give them almost 360 vision.**

Helping them to cling onto and climb tall vegetation are their adapted feet, which are relatively broad, and they have an opposable inner toe that gives them extra grip.

Like many small mammals with short lifespans - they live about 18 months at most - they reach sexual maturity quickly and are able to have up to three litters each breeding season. Vulnerable to predation from stoats, weasels, foxes, cats and some birds, they are also at risk in cold, wet weather. They do not hibernate and their very fine, pale ginger fur offers little protection from the elements.

Most known for building a remarkable nest, they weave this small, spherical ball out of grass stems, perched high up in tall vegetation, about 10cms in diameter. The female makes these nests at night, shredding and weaving living, fresh grass leaves, which remain attached to the grass stalk. She lines the nest with more leaves, pulled through the outer wall. There is no entrance as such, they simply push through the wall and then close it up again. This snugly nest can hold up to 8 teeny young mice, where they are weaned at 10 days, staying for only 16 days altogether, before they are abandoned by the mother and start to fend for themselves. The majority of them are born during August and early September, hence their name.

Harvest mice eat seeds as their main diet, but also include insects in summer and fruits and berries in the autumn months. In the colder months they leave their high, vertical habitat and often hide away by burrowing beneath the soil to try to keep warm. They make a smaller nest in winter, much nearer to the ground for warmth, where they store food to help them survive until the next spring.

**Because they prefer the warmth, they are mainly found in southern Britain, but their numbers have drastically reduced due to intensive farming and loss of habitat, like many farmland creatures. We can help them by leaving areas of rough grass, and allowing vegetation to grow up around ponds, ditches and rivers. They are the only native mice to build nests above the ground, intricately woven little balls of grass and a delightful sight if you are lucky enough to find one. They are seen best in winter as vegetation dies away, but will no longer have any mice occupants inside them.**