

Tuesday Club Nature Notes

with Jan Flamank



PYGMY SHREW

This is our most tiny shrew, widespread throughout the UK and surprisingly resilient given its minute size. It is only 2.5 inches long, but its long hairy tail of 1.5 inches adds to the overall length.

As such a small warm bloodied mammal, it has a proportionately larger surface area than bigger mammals and so loses body heat quickly. Many mammals grow longer fur to combat the cold, but this tactic would hinder the movement of such a small creature, so after the moult in autumn, its fur stays at about 3mm long all over. We don't know why it happens or how it is controlled, but the autumn moult starts on the rump, working up towards the long nose, but the spring moult does the reverse, starting at the nose then working towards the rump. Wild indeed.

Being so small has some advantages, and the pygmy shrew can hide effectively in a wide range of habitats, including fissures in rocky outcrops, but prefers long grass and shrubby vegetation in woodland where they can also easily feast on their prey. They mainly eat spiders, beetles, woodlice and snails and feed almost constantly, as they have to consume 25% more than their own weight every day, just to keep alive. That is a huge amount of tucker!

Luckily, it has a very efficient digestive system, and excellent hearing that picks up the minute sounds of moving invertebrates. Their wonderfully long nose is covered with hairs that detect movements of prey in the undergrowth. Once they pounce on a spider or woodlice they bite it with teeth that are red at the tip, due to iron oxide in their enamel. Juicy snails also provide water for them. Pygmy shrews have a very high metabolic rate, with a heart rate of 250 beats per minute, and a breathing rate of 200 breaths a minute and live a short, fast life of only up to a year in the wild, with many dying within 4 months of birth.

Solitary creatures apart from mating, they usually have 2 litters of 4 to 7 young, born mainly April to September. They grow rapidly on the rich milk of their mother, increasing their size 10 fold in just 2 weeks. They are independent at about 3 weeks old, and then leave the nest to establish their own territory. Wet and cold weather is the biggest cause of mortality, as they impede the shrew's ability to keep warm and find enough food.

We are unlikely to see live pygmy shrews, who are themselves a tasty snack for owls, but the next time you walk near woodland or long grass, imagine them rushing about, foraging and feasting on small invertebrates, resting only in very short naps of a few minutes in their hidden undergrowth homes. And the proud possessors of red tipped teeth.....